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DOUBLE ISSUE
APRIL 18-25, 2016
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LINEUP

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NFL DRAFT PREVIEW 2016

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Fashionable 50
Flip Cover
Athletes have long been on the leading edge of the fashion conversation. Now, as the two worlds cross paths more than ever, SI unveils its first Fashionable 50 list, honoring the sports world's most stylish figures
By Jamie Lisanti

+
SAY AMEN
Jordan Spieth held a one-shot lead as he teed off on the par-3 12th hole at Augusta National on Sunday. What happened next became an indelible part of the haunted history of Amen Corner.

Photograph by
Robert Beck
For Sports Illustrated

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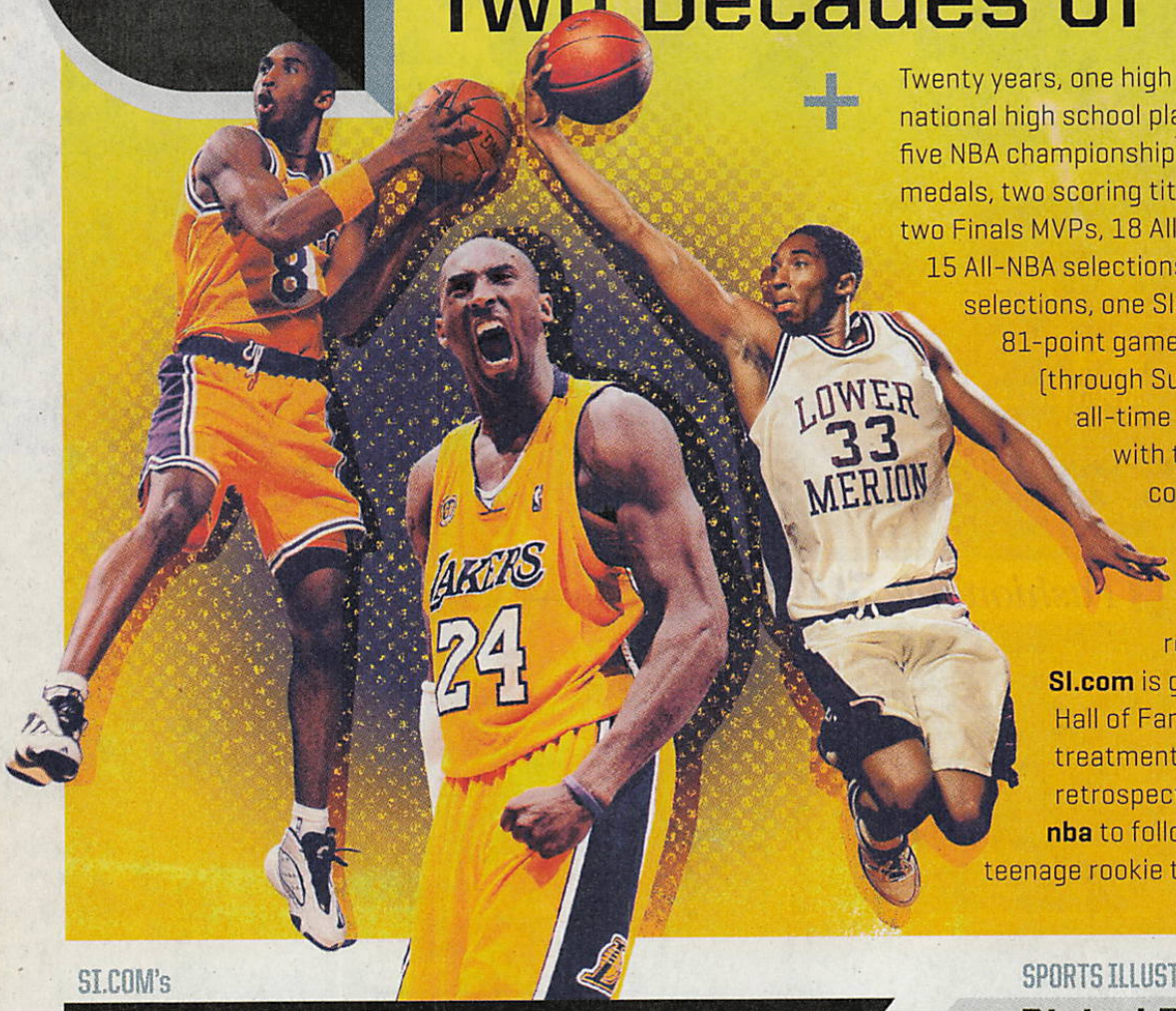
FOR APRIL 18-25, 2016

Two Decades of Kobe



Twenty years, one high school state title, national high school player of the year, five NBA championships, two Olympic gold medals, two scoring titles, one league MVP, two Finals MVPs, 18 All-Star appearances, 15 All-NBA selections, 12 All-Defensive selections, one Slam Dunk title, one 81-point game, 33,570 points (through Sunday, third on the all-time list), countless beefs with teammates and coaches and several off-court controversies. With Kobe Bryant dribbling off into retirement this week, **SI.com** is giving the future Hall of Famer the full-court treatment with a year-by-year retrospective. Go to **SI.com/nba** to follow his journey from teenage rookie to living legend.

SI.COM's

NFL Draft Live Show

Will Carson Wentz *(page 82)* or Jared Goff be the first quarterback picked? Tune in to **SI.com/nfldraftlive** on Thursday, April 28, starting at 7:30 p.m. EDT, for our 2016 *NFL Draft Live Show*, presented by MET-Rx, for complete first-round coverage from our panel of experts, including instant analysis of each pick, team-by-team evaluations and breakdowns of the day's biggest surprises.

Just how accurate was our NFL Mock Draft *(page 112)*? Did we get it right with Ole Miss offensive tackle **Laremy Tunsil** (78) at No. 1?

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Digital Bonus

Gritty Woman

From the SI Vault: April 15, 1996

Christy Martin is knocking down stereotypes even as she refuses to champion the cause of women in the ring

By Richard Hoffer

To read this and other stories from the Sports Illustrated *archives, go to* **SI.com/vault**

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1 of 3

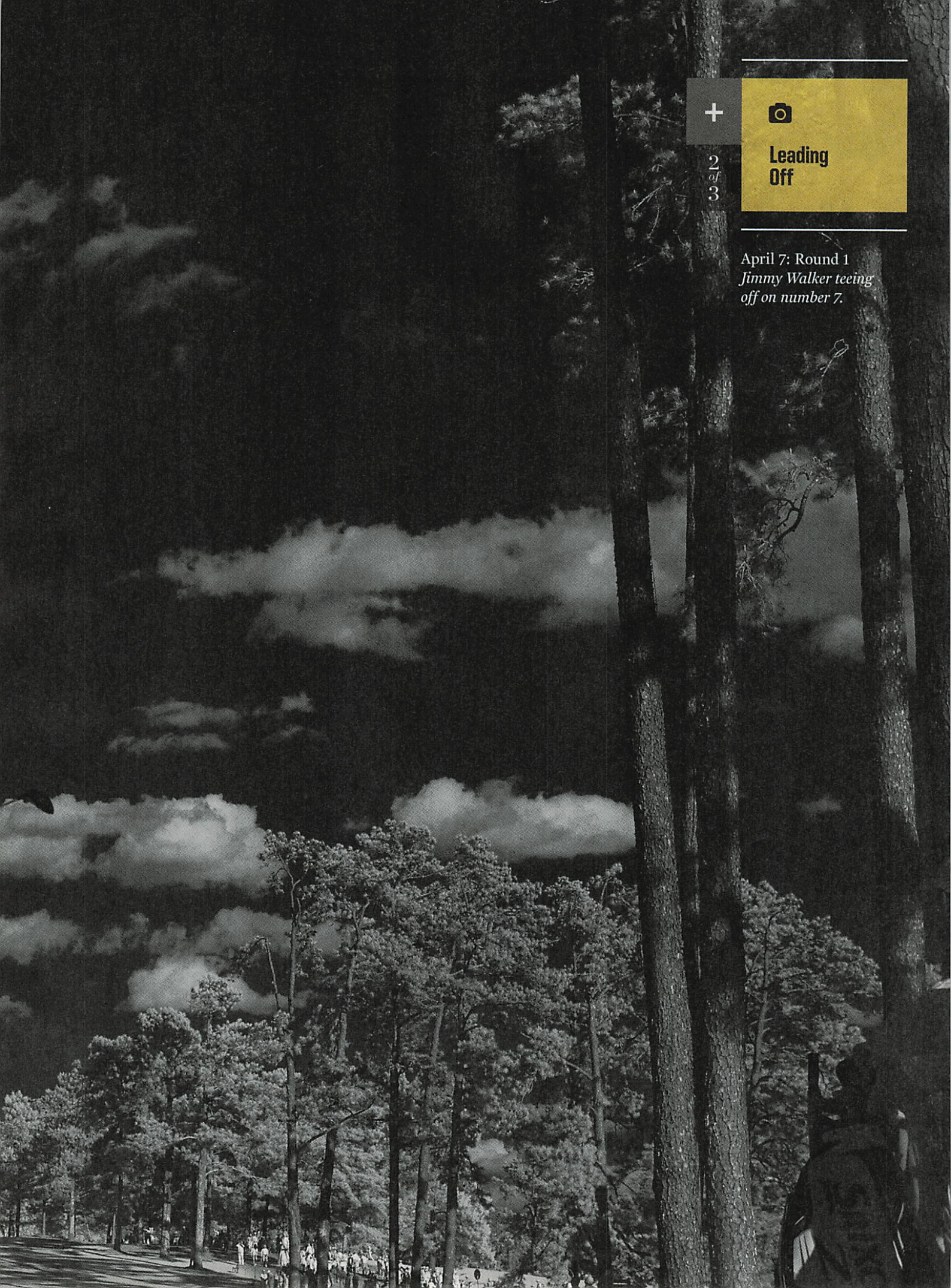
Leading Off

Negative Impressions

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT BECK
For Sports Illustrated

Augusta National is the backdrop for some of the most beautiful imagery in sports—and also the most familiar. For this year's Masters one of SI's photographers set out to cast the golf cathedral in a new light: with infrared photos.

April 8: Round 2
Charley Hoffman teeing off on number 12.



2 of 3

Leading Off

April 7: Round 1
Jimmy Walker teeing off on number 7.

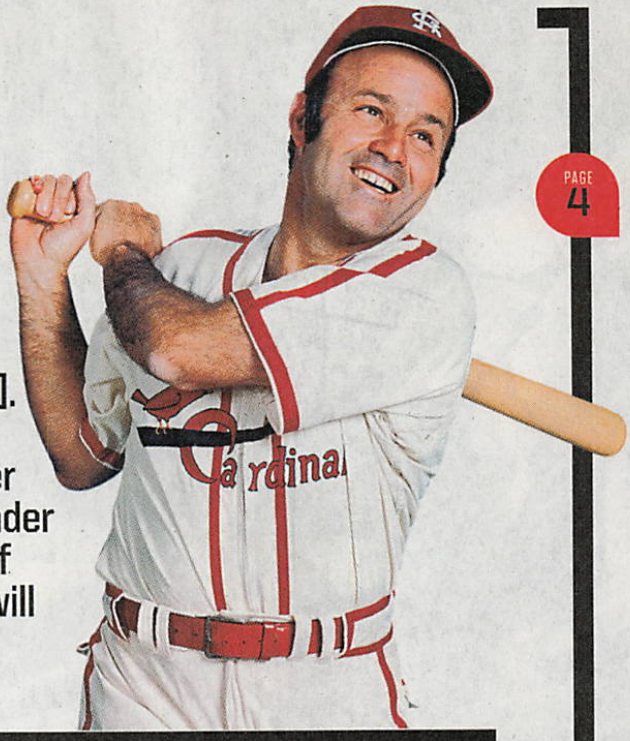
3 of 3

Leading Off

April 7: Round 1
Jason Dufner, Louis Oosthuizen and Patrick Reed approaching the green on number 1.

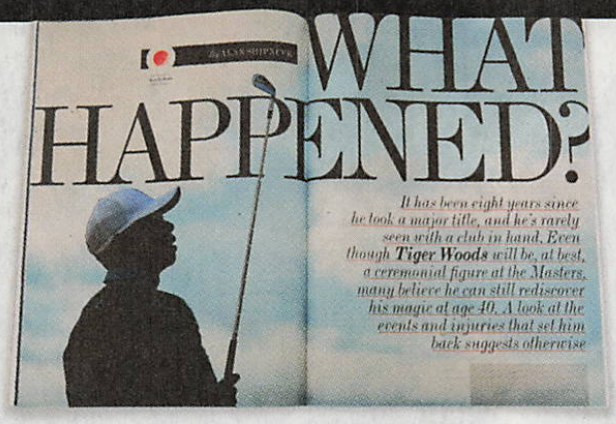
INBOX

FOR APRIL 4, 2016



I was saddened to hear of the death of **Joe Garagiola** [SCORECARD]. My favorite games were when he teamed up with Vin Scully, another class act. Joe's passing is a reminder to me that this is Vin's last year of broadcasting. I guarantee you I will not miss any of his games.

Russ W. Bill, Fountain Valley, Calif.


WHAT HAPPENED?
It has been eight years since he took a major title, and he's rarely seen with a club in hand. Even though Tiger Woods will be, at best, a ceremonial figure at the Masters, many believe he can still rediscover his magic at age 40. A look at the events and injuries that set him back suggests otherwise

I was amazed that your piece on **Tiger Woods** did not bring up the one thing that has been obvious since he came on the Tour: His swing is too hard, and it has damaged his body.

Dick Thorp, Maplewood, Minn.

I appreciated that Alan Shipnuck didn't merely trash Tiger for his extramarital activities but showed his human side, his mistakes and his regrets, in assessing where he is now. I was reminded of an old saying: Ego leads to suffering, but only suffering can tame ego. Woods is a work in progress, just like the rest of us.

Bryan J. Morrissey, Hingham, Mass.

Prospects like Anthony Molina and **Riley Pint** don't need Perfect Game to ensure their baseball careers *(Under the Gun)*. To the contrary, organizations like Perfect Game need Molina and Pint. Showcasing such promising young talent at their so-called extravaganzas helps them extract thousands of dollars from parents with kids who have no real chance of making it to pro ball. That's the real tragedy.

Norm Laforet, London, Ont.

PAGE 4

LEADING OFF

After reading what each NL pitcher had to say about batting, I now believe most pitchers could care less if they had to hit in a game or not. And I couldn't agree more with Dodgers righty **Brandon McCarthy**: If I'm going to a game, I want to see the best hitters at the plate.

Mike Gerber
Woodland Hills, Calif.

Your story about pitchers and hitting today brought back memories of hurlers who were actually threats with the bat—guys like Early Wynn, Jack Harshman and Gary Peters, who even batted sixth for the White Sox.

Mark Liptak
Chubbuck, Idaho

PAGE 66

POINT AFTER

While I enjoyed **Frank Kaminsky**'s perspective and appreciated his play, I question his ability to fill out a bracket. He claims to favor underdogs, then chose North Carolina, a No. 1 seed, to win it all. A close call wins only in horseshoes.

M. David Levy
Williamsburg, Va.

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ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MCCARTHY); KEN SMITH/IMAGE/GETTY IMAGES (KAMINSKY); AL TELLEEN/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PINT); EVERETT COLLECTION (GARAGIOLA)

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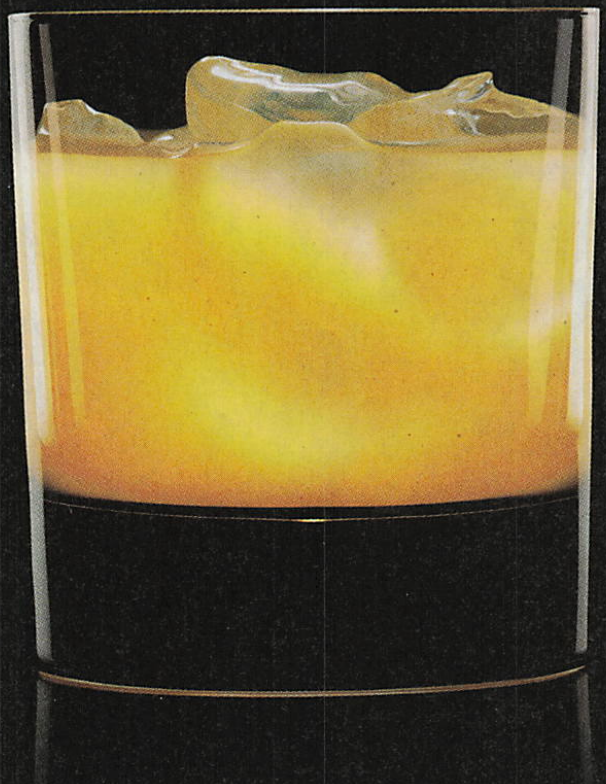

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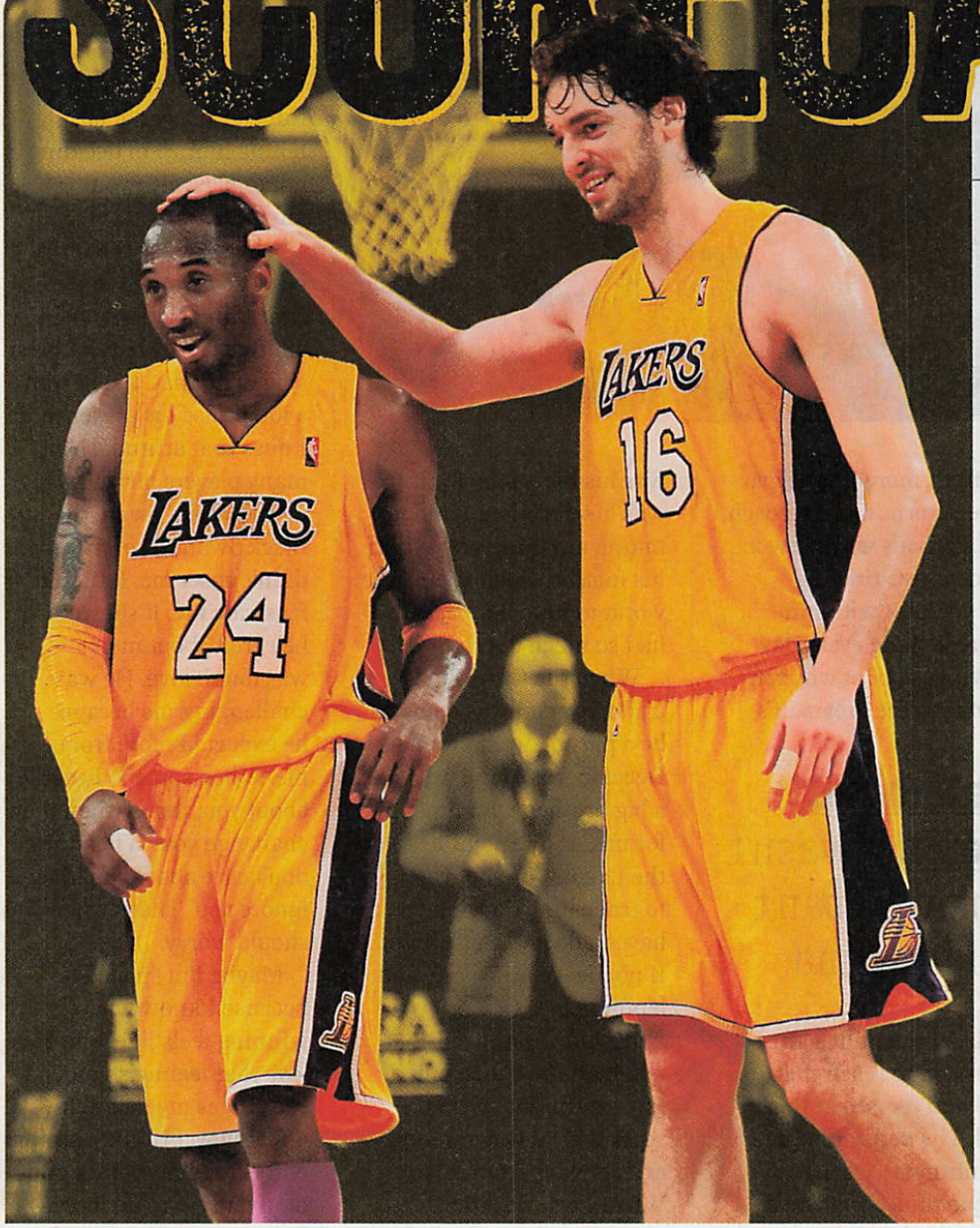
SCORECARD

Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH



STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES

Swan Song

The key partner for Kobe Bryant in the Lakers' two post-Shaq titles says goodbye—and pines for some relentless dedication

BY PAU GASOL AS TOLD TO LEE JENKINS

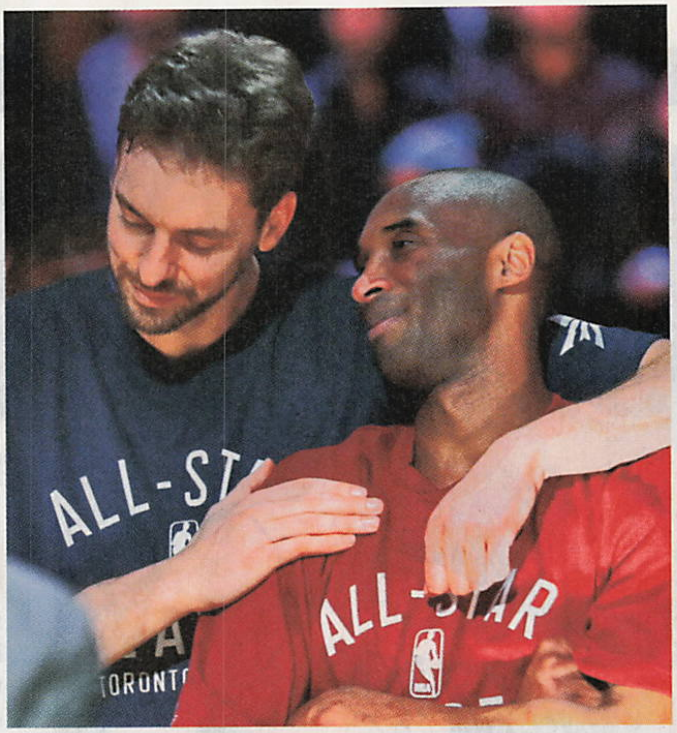
WHEN KOBE BRYANT retires after the Lakers' season finale, this Wednesday, he will go down as one of the biggest winners, greatest scorers and richest characters in NBA history. He will not be remembered as one of the best teammates, unless you heed the opinion of Pau Gasol, considered in many quarters to be the league's wisest man. On Feb. 1, 2008, Gasol was traded from the Grizzlies to the Lakers. What followed were three straight Finals appearances, two championships and one everlasting partnership. The White Swan, as Bryant famously termed his Spanish sidekick ("I need him to be Black Swan!"), looks back on the six-plus years they spent together and wonders if he can ever duplicate the success.

MY FIRST DAY with the Lakers, I met the team at The Ritz in Washington, D.C., and at 1:30 in the morning there was a knock on my door. I found out later that Kobe doesn't sleep much. I sat on the bed, I think, and he sat on the table next to the TV. He welcomed me to the team, and then he told me it was "go" time. It was winning time. He felt I could take him to the

top again, and he wanted to make sure I knew that. "This is our chance," he said. It was powerful and meaningful.

We were a perfect fit. A lot of the triangle offense is based on reads and working off one another and understanding each other. I understood the game. I was meticulous about it. I think he appreciated that. I think he saw it as refreshing. Our relationship clicked from the beginning. We both knew we needed each other to succeed.

There are so many games in the NBA, it's easy to start going through the motions. He kept everybody on edge. In practice he challenged people. He talked trash to people. It wasn't for everybody. Some players can't deal with that, but I didn't mind. It was his way of motivating you and pushing you to give more.



HOLDING COURT
Gasol, who went to the playoffs six times in seven tries with Bryant, paid tribute at the All-Star Game in February.

ELSA/GETTY IMAGES

stronger, more aggressive, more determined approach. I think that's why we won the next two titles.

If you play with him, you're looking every day at living proof of why the greats are the greats. It's

In practice Kobe challenged people. He talked trash. It wasn't for everybody. Some players can't deal with that, but I didn't mind.

It's easy to get comfortable. He made sure nobody was comfortable.

After we lost Game 6 to the Celtics in the 2008 Finals, we didn't talk about it much. That was a time to digest what had happened, why we fell short and let that fire start burning in our bodies and our stomachs. We went into the next season with a different attitude—a not by accident. It's an obsession to reach that level and remain at that level. The dedication, the commitment, is such a unique thing. You don't find it. He inspired me to be better, to see the game in a more detailed way.

We beat the Magic in the 2009 Finals, and everybody was happy, but it was different for him. It had a special meaning. Basketball was his life, and winning was his devotion. I'm not taking anything away from his family, which means the world to him, but basketball had so much depth to it.

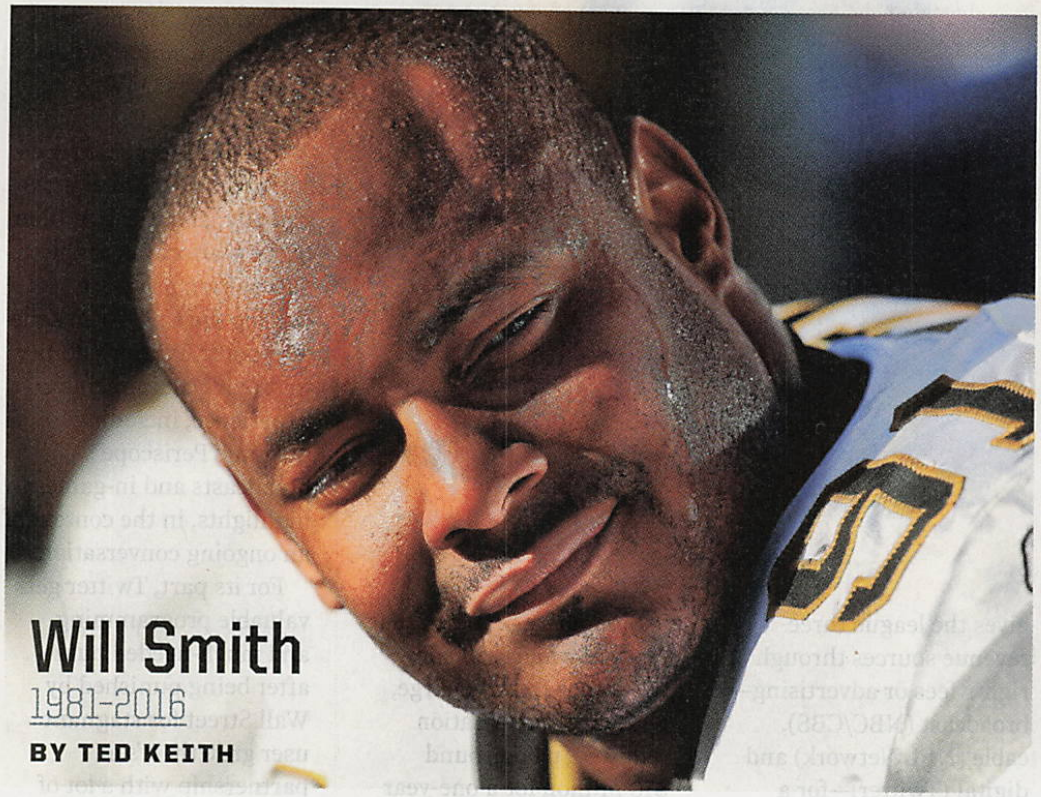
When the Chris Paul trade, which I was going to be a part of, was vetoed in December 2011, he was like a big brother, standing up for me. At one point he told the Lakers, "If you're going to trade him, do what you have to do and trade him. If not, leave him alone and let him play."

We didn't hang out that much off the court, but toward the end we had several meals one-on-one, and we would reminisce. When I was deciding whether to leave the Lakers in 2014, he came to my house in Redondo Beach. He said he wanted me to stay in L.A. and battle with him and finish our careers together. Those were his words. I told him I was in a place where I needed a change in my heart. I needed a change of air. It was one of the toughest things I've ever done, telling him, "I'm deciding not to play with you anymore."

I signed with the Bulls because I wanted to put myself in position to win another title. I haven't been able to do that. I miss him a lot. I miss his presence. I miss that attitude. Not many players have it.

The White Swan, the Black Swan, all of that, it didn't upset me. It didn't frustrate me. It showed he cared about me. It was tough love. He was challenging me because he expected more from me. When somebody cares about you, that's when they challenge you. When they don't care about you, they ignore you. That's when you should worry.

Maybe I'm spoiled because I know what winning feels like, and I love that feeling so much. It changes my mood. It affects me. I think winning will extend my career and motivate me to do more. Being around Kobe had an impact on my life. I'm going to be a free agent this summer, and I think about that now. I want to maximize the years I have left. I want to be part of something special again. □



Will Smith
1981-2016

BY TED KEITH

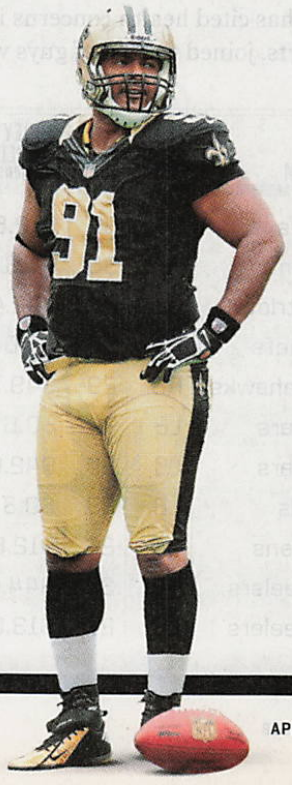
AMONG THE FIRST items on the still-active personal website of former Saints defensive lineman Will Smith is a line that he "wants to be an FBI agent following his playing career."

Smith, who was reportedly set to become a coaching intern for his old team this year, won't get the chance to do either. Last Saturday night in New Orleans, Smith was killed after an incident that police say began when Cardell Hayes's Hummer H2 hit the back of the Mercedes-Benz SUV that Smith, 34, was driving with his wife, Racquel, in the passenger seat. The SUV then crashed into the car in front of him, and there was an argument that ended with Hayes's taking out a handgun and shooting Smith in the back and torso and Smith's wife twice in the leg. (As of Monday she was in stable condition.) Police have charged Hayes, 28, with second-degree murder; his former lawyer, John Fuller, is leaving the case to become a judge but before doing so said, "My client was not the aggressor."

Smith's death was the latest and most high-profile example of gun violence and a rising murder rate in New Orleans. Of the 164 people murdered in the city in 2015 (up from 150 in '14), "91% were killed by gunfire," according to *The Times-Picayune*. "It's so dangerous," Cardinals safety Tyrann Mathieu, a New Orleans native, said on Fox Sports Radio. "I fly in, and I fly out of town, that's how scared I am."

Speaking about New Orleans's problem with gun violence to *USA Today*, Saints coach Sean Payton said, "It's like the Wild Wild West here," and quarterback Drew Brees, a teammate of Smith's for eight years, told Peter King of TheMMQB.com, "We become desensitized to it. And so many people die, but we pay attention when it's Will Smith. That forces so many people to deal with the reality of a terrible thing, the gun violence in the city."

"He really was the cornerstone of our team," said Saints quarterback Drew Brees.



BIG UNEASY
Smith's death has heightened the attention to gun violence in New Orleans.

To Smith's former teammates, he was more than a Pro Bowler in 2006 or the sack leader on the Super Bowl–winning team in '09 or a member of the club's Hall of Fame, elected this off-season after finishing with 67½ sacks in nine seasons. "He really was the cornerstone of our team," Brees told King.

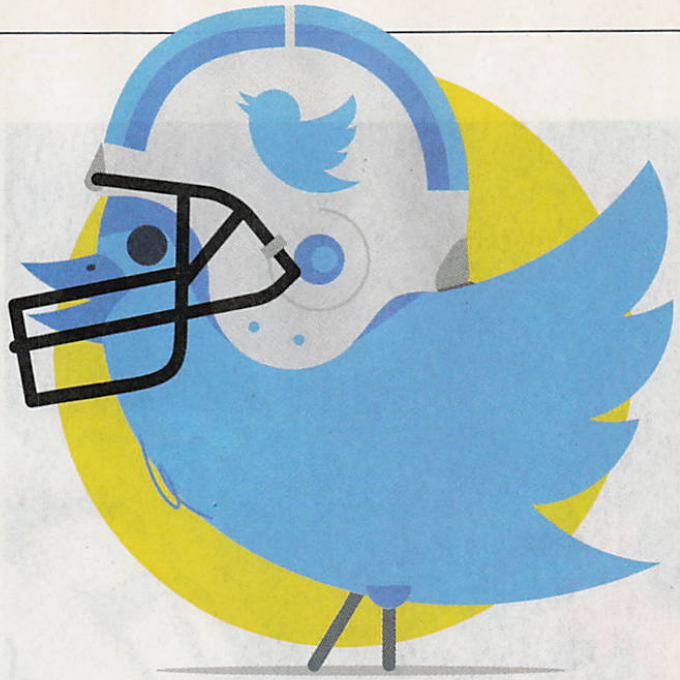
He was also a pillar of the community. Smith's foundation, Where There's A Will There's A Way, helped at-risk children, and he was a frequent part of the team's charitable efforts.

Before coming to New Orleans as the 18th pick in the 2004 draft, Smith had been a star at Ohio State where he graduated with a degree in criminology. Perhaps in death he will have the sort of impact at ending senseless violence that he hoped to have in life. □

STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES; GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

NFL
+
Social Services

Streaming the league



NO SPORTS LEAGUE monetizes its product more successfully than the NFL, which last week announced that it had selected Twitter as its partner to stream 10 *Thursday Night Football* games in 2016. Here's the brilliance behind that move: Those rights have already been sold to broadcasters. CBS and NBC each air five *TNF* games, all of which also appear on the NFL Network. This gives the league three revenue sources through rights fees or advertising—broadcast (NBC/CBS), cable (NFL Network) and digital (Twitter)—for a package of games that aren't close to its best.

Bloomberg reported that Twitter, which will show the games free of charge, with no authentication required, paid around $10 million for a one-year deal—a bargain given other NFL rights packages. (Yahoo paid $17 million to stream a single Sunday game last year.) Why the low price?

The NFL sees Twitter as a unique means to expand globally; about 252 million of the platform's roughly 320 million users are outside the U.S. The league also noted Twitter's ability to provide an immersive experience, including pregame Periscope broadcasts and in-game highlights, in the context of an ongoing conversation.

For its part, Twitter gets valuable programming and much-needed buzz after being punished by Wall Street for stagnant user growth. It's a partnership with a lot of potential for both parties.

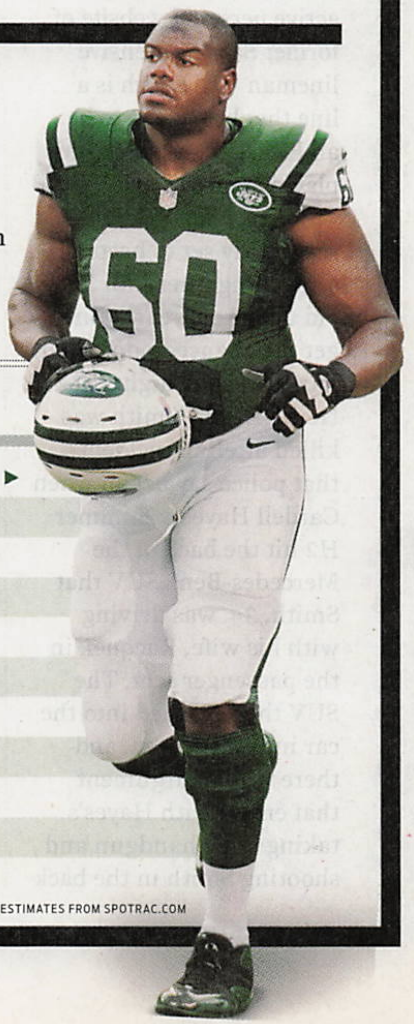
—Richard Deitsch

Walk Off

ON APRIL 8, Jets left tackle D'Brickashaw Ferguson, 32, announced his retirement after 10 years in the NFL. The team had asked him to take a cut from his $10.375 million salary. Instead, Ferguson, who has cited health concerns in the past even though he has missed only one play in 167 starts, joined the list of guys walking away before their time.

NAME	TEAM	POS.	AGE	MONEY EARNED* (MILLIONS)	REASON
D'Brickashaw Ferguson	Jets	OT	32	$72.6	pay cut/other interests/health ▶
Calvin Johnson	Lions	WR	30	$113.8	persistent ankle problems
Jerod Mayo	Patriots	LB	30	$42.4	three straight years on IR
Husain Abdullah	Chiefs	FS	30	$6.0	five concussions
Marshawn Lynch	Seahawks	RB	29	$49.7	unknown
Chris Borland	49ers	LB	24	$0.6	concern over head trauma
Patrick Willis	49ers	LB	30	$42.6	foot problems
AJ Tarpley	Bills	LB	23	$0.3	four concussions
Jake Locker	Titans	QB	26	$12.6	lack of desire
Heath Miller	Steelers	TE	33	$44.0	unknown
Jason Worilds	Steelers	LB	27	$13.6	other interests

*EARNINGS ESTIMATES FROM SPOTRAC.COM



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A SHOWDOWN FOR SKIN SUPREMACY

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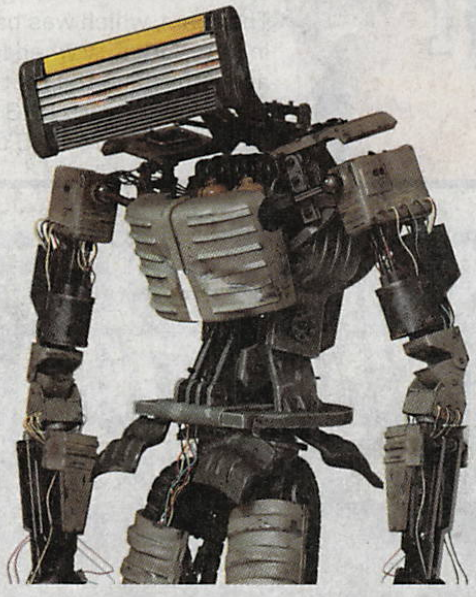

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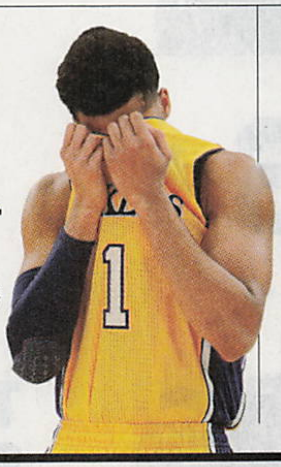
GO FIGURE

3 Incorrect results in the 2016 NCAA tournament bracket of Rebecca Gentry, a senior at Jasper (Ind.) High. A self-described nonfan, Rebecca correctly picked 60 of the 63 games in the tournament (the First Four games were not included), missing on two first-round games (Northern Iowa over Texas and Hawaii over California) and North Carolina's semifinal victory over Syracuse *(above)*. The odds of filling out a perfect bracket are 1 in 9.2 quintillion.

62 Losses this season, through last Thursday, for the Lakers, the third straight season they have set a franchise record for losses. In 2013-14 they lost 55 games, and in 2014-15 they lost 61. With four games to play this season, L.A. was 16-62.



132 Years since the Giants scored at least 12 runs in two of their first four games. The team, which was based in New York City when last accomplishing the feat, in 1884, beat the Brewers 12-3 on April 4 and the Dodgers 12-6 on April 7.

THEY SAID IT

"IT'S KIND OF LIKE TRAINING WITH A WEIGHT VEST ON."

Kikkan Randall

U.S. Olympic cross-country skier, on maintaining her intensive workout routine while pregnant

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Sam Hinkie's bizarre 13-page resignation letter as 76ers GM included an Abe Lincoln quote that Lincoln never said.

Trevor Story
Rockies shortstop hit six home runs in his first four games. If he keeps going long at this rate, he'll be epic.

HOT ▲

NOT ▼

Tyler Summitt
Pat's son resigns as Louisiana Tech women's hoops coach after admitting to an "inappropriate relationship."

STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES (NCAA); JASON O. WATSON/GETTY IMAGES (GIANTS); KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/GETTY IMAGES (LAKERS); MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES (HINKIE); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (STORY); ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP (SUMMITT); MIKE HEWITT/GETTY IMAGES (RANDALL)

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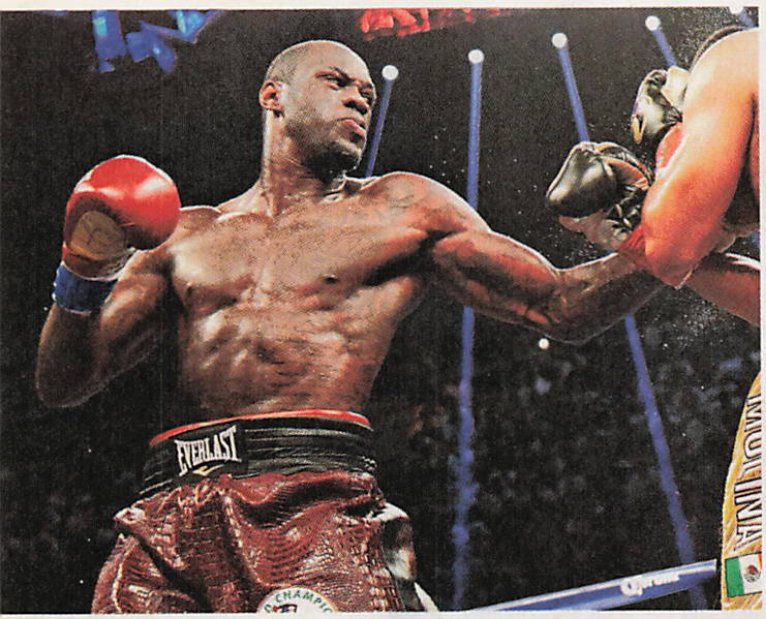

Water Works

Deontay Wilder wants to make a splash

IT TAKES ONE moment and one perfectly placed haymaker from Deontay Wilder to end someone's night. A true knockout artist, he has finished off his opponent before the final bell 97.2% of the time (36–0, 35 KOs). Perfecting such a precise, devastating craft has taken the 6' 7", 228-pound WBC heavyweight champion years of relentless fundamental preparation—and kayaking.

Wilder has made an art of blending recreation and training on a lake near his Tuscaloosa, Ala., home, using various watercraft and unique activities to hone his body and technique. Besides many expected regimens—including situational sparring, punch-placement training, medicine-ball work and meditation—he has incorporated kayaking into his exercise routine because it provides an intense core workout. Beyond that, the 30-year-old Wilder does "pull-ups" while he's being dragged through the water behind his power boat, a practice to which he attributes not only increased strength but also his ability to endure abuse without losing stamina.

"I love the water because you're not working only one part [of your body]," says Wilder. "When I'm on my boat, I'll come up with crazy exercises just to give me the resistance from the water. It keeps me in shape and keeps my mind feeling right."

That sort of focus is essential for Wilder, who recently hired a nutritionist and a personal chef to help improve his diet in the hope of achieving his sizable goals. "I want to be remembered as one of the true American warriors, as a guy that brought the heavyweight division back to its glory days," he says.

Wilder will take the next step in that quest when he puts his unblemished record on the line against Alexander Povetkin in Moscow on May 21. Until then, he'll be off the deep end. —*Daniel Friedman*

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Boxing Is More Than Fitness

"My health is something that I believe is extremely crucial. Shadowboxing has helped me improve my hand speed and benefited my overall cardio conditioning. Boxing especially allows me to channel a powerful and aggressive side that leaves me feeling like I can conquer anything I set my mind to."

Hailey Clauson
SI Swimsuit model

Paddle Power

The key to a good kayaking workout is using your entire body during the stroke. Here are a few tips on the proper technique to turn your spin on the water into a core-building cruise.

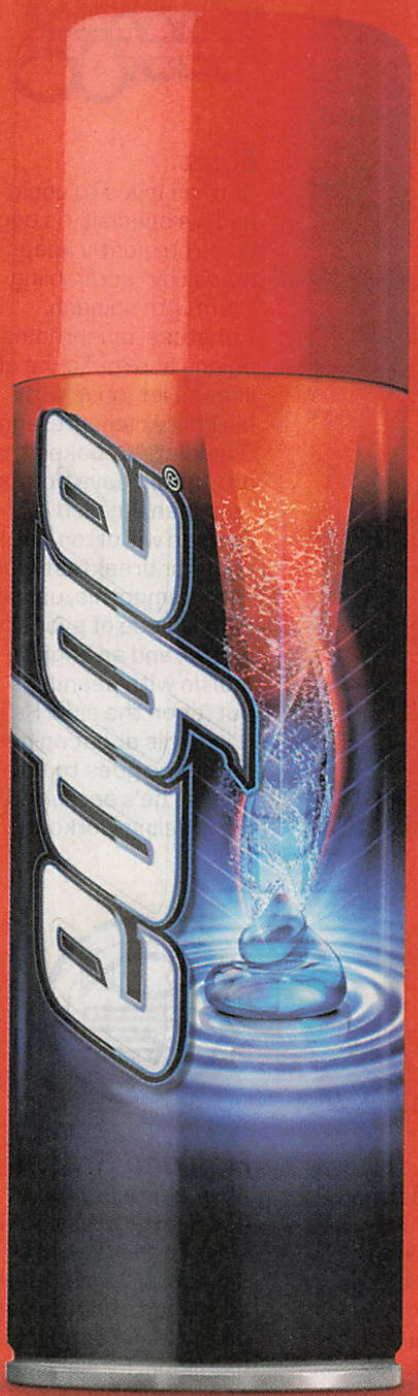
For more athlete training profiles and tips, go to ***SI.com/edge***

The Reach
Extend one end of the paddle forward, until it's almost parallel with your feet.

The Twist
As the paddle moves forward, rotate so your ribs on that side angle toward the bow.

Push-Pull
Unwind your body while pulling with the forward hand and pushing with the aftward one.

KEVIN D.LILES FORS SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILDER); JAMES MACARI FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CLAUSON); MARTIN LAKSMAN (ILLUSTRATION)



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EDGE | FRIDGE RAIDER

Smoothie Operator

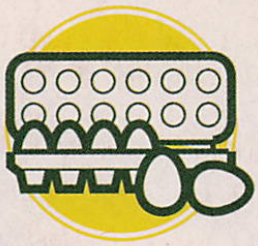
How to eat like an Olympic diver

SAM DORMAN WATCHES what he eats. In fact, when the 25-year-old diver received a total nutrition breakdown from University of Miami director of exercise physiology Wesley Smith a few weeks ago, he was told that, overall, he does a nice job.

Except after workouts. "That's what I was bad at," says Dorman.

Dorman, who will attempt to qualify for both the individual and synchronized three-meter springboards in the Rio Games at the U.S. trials this June in Indianapolis, used to wait a few hours after his workout before chowing down. Now he grabs a protein bar and a Gatorade right away.

Eating healthy is a necessity for Dorman, the ACC 2015 men's diver of the year at Miami and a member of the U.S. team in '14, but it's not hard. "It's a lifestyle I enjoy," says Dorman. "I enjoy eating healthy. Not even for sports, but for general health." Of course, he does still make the occasional late-night run for a pint of Ben & Jerry's half-baked ice cream. *—Jeremy Fuchs*



Eggs

Dorman loves to cook, and his specialty is eggs. While he mostly keeps it healthy—scrambling them with spinach, tomatoes, mushrooms, onions and garlic—he also likes to let loose with his guilty pleasure: eggs Benedict. "I cooked that on Easter," says Dorman, "and man, I nailed it." Dorman will often eat eggs for breakfast along with a smoothie, usually with a piece of avocado on top, and an English muffin with peanut butter on the side. He'll down this about an hour before he goes to the pool so he's energized for his grueling workouts.

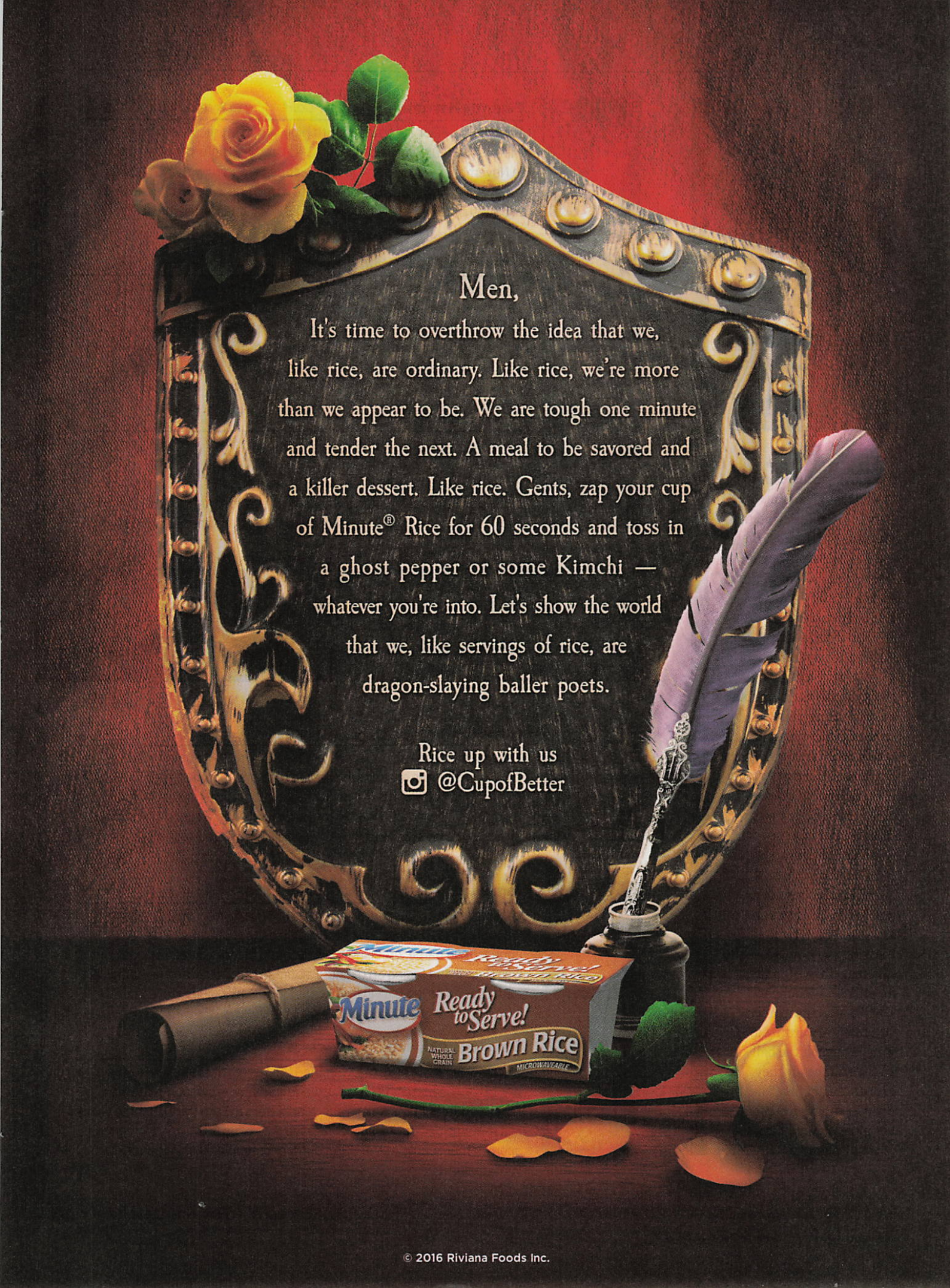
Smoothies

Most mornings Dorman will make a vitamin-packed smoothie with more green vegetables than most kids eat in a year. He blends spinach, kale and bok choy, along with a mix of berries, chia powder and almond milk. After his meeting with the nutritionist, he now adds almonds, cashews and Brazil nuts, whose nutrients he was found to be lacking. "I drink it throughout the day," says Dorman.

Fish and Greens

After a grocery run, Dorman puts his cooking skills to the test. Salmon, a staple in his apartment, usually goes directly into a teriyaki marinade. He'll also make asparagus, his favorite vegetable. "I'll put salt, pepper, lime and garlic powder on it," he says. He doesn't adhere to a specified diet but uses guidelines designed to keep him at his best. No one forces him to eat healthy, Dorman says, "but I try."

JEFFERY A. SALTER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (DORMAN); MARTIN LAKSMAN (ILLUSTRATIONS)


Men,
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Sports Illustrated
HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETE OF THE MONTH
Presented by THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

CONNOR BRUCE, the starting catcher at Monte Vista High in Danville, Calif., helped the Mustangs to the East Bay league co-championship last year and is one of the school's Rally Chairs—in charge of morning announcements, pep rallies and general school spirit. One of the most visible students on campus, the fun-loving senior is serious about highlighting less-visible members of the community. The president of the school's Friends of the Special Olympics club, Connor volunteers with special-education students during lunch every day, and for the past four years, he's been an assistant coach for the Danville A's, a Little League Challenger Division team for athletes with mental and physical disabilities. "It's really rewarding to watch them hit the ball and see all the joy they get running to first," he says. "It warms my heart." For more on Connor, visit **SI.com/HSathlete** —A.F.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK

Eduardo Herrera | *Madera, Calif.* | *Track and Field*

Eduardo, a senior at Madera South High, set meet records in the 3,000 meters (8:15.01) and the mile (4:11.41) at the Stanford Invitational. In November he broke the Central Section 5K record with a 14:48.80 runner-up finish at the Division I state meet, and in December he was fifth at the Nike Cross Nationals (15:13.20). Eduardo will run at Colorado.

Amber Ramirez | *San Antonio* | *Basketball*

Amber, a senior point guard at Wagner High, won the Powerade Jamfest three-point contest two days before scoring a team-high 21 points (including five treys) for the East in a 92–88 loss at the McDonald's All-American Game in Chicago. This season she led the Thunderbirds with 26.0 points per game. Amber will play at TCU.

Trevin Kozlowski | *Santa Clarita, Calif.* | *Hockey*

Trevin, a senior goaltender at The Gunnery in Washington, Conn., had 25 saves in a 3–2 win over Milton Academy for the New England Prep School Elite Eight title. He went 23–1 with a .942 save percentage and was named *U.S. Hockey Report*'s goaltender and prep player of the year. Trevin has committed to West Point for the fall of 2017.

Lacey Fincher | *Mobile* | *Softball*

Lacey, a sophomore shortstop at Class 5A Faith Academy, batted .563 in six games at the Honeybee Invitational and belted seven home runs, including two in a 4–2 win over the host, top-ranked 7A team, Baker High for the title. Through Sunday she was hitting .478 with 15 homers in 29 games. Lacey has verbally committed to Georgia.

Jamie Lackner | *Westlake, Ohio* | *Baseball*

Lackner, a junior first baseman at the College of Wooster (Ohio), hit a double in a 13–4 loss to Marietta College to reach base in his 61st consecutive game, breaking a 13-year-old Division III record. Lackner was 0 for 2 and facing an 0-and-2 count in the sixth when he got his hit. Last season he led D-III in homers (17), RBIs (69) and total bases (143).

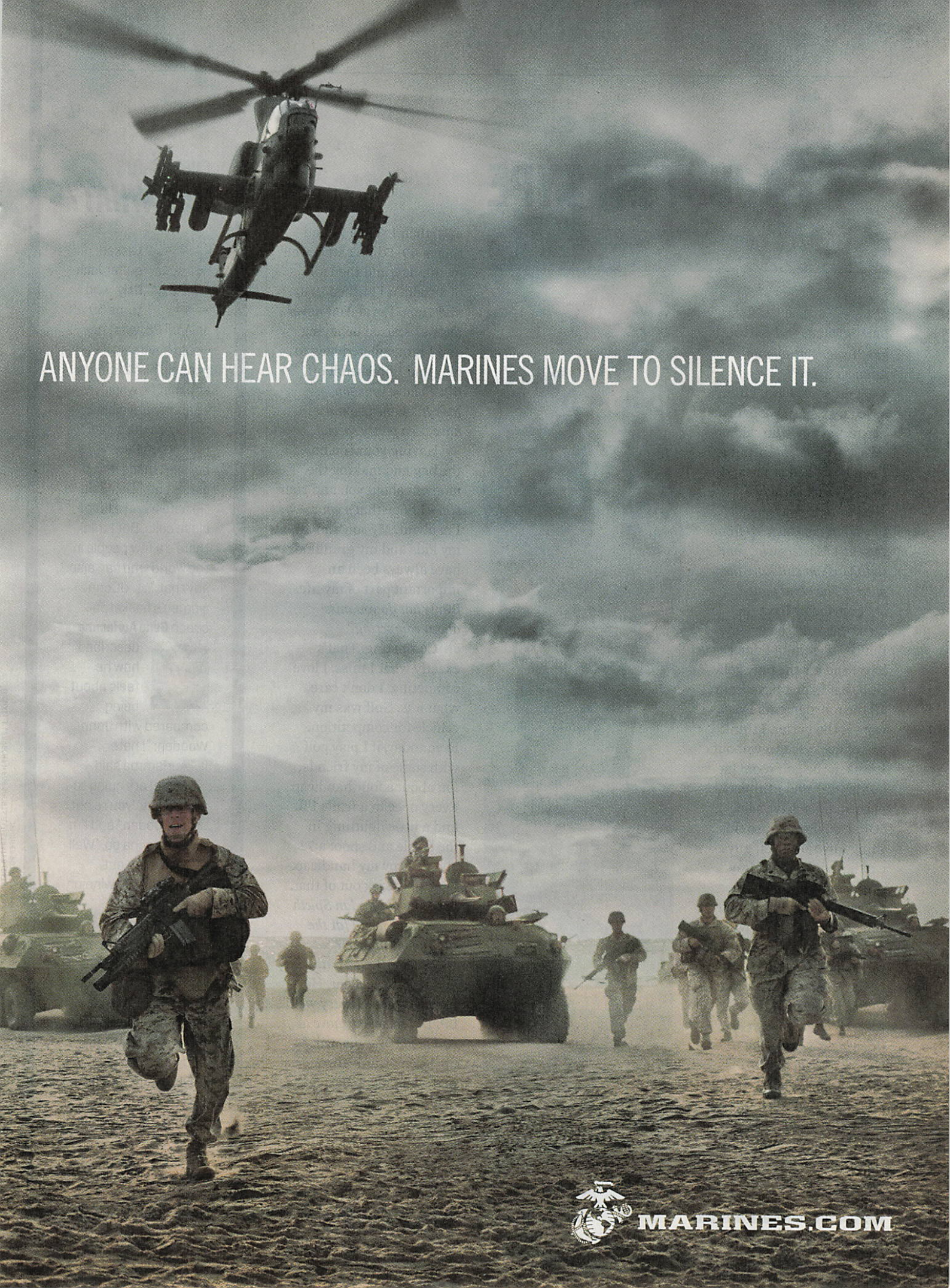
Morolake Akinosun | *Aurora, Ill.* | *Track and Field*

Akinosun, a senior at Texas, won the 100 meters at the Texas Relays in 11.07—the fastest time in the world this year—to become the first female sprinter in the Relays' 89-year history to take the 100 three years in a row. Besides Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Akinosun is the only woman to score in four events at the NCAA outdoor championship in repeat years.

Nominate Now

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces**
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.

ALEXANDRA FENWICK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRUCE); ELOY QUINTANA (HERRERA); COURTESY OF MCDONALD'S (RAMIREZ); COURTESY OF THE GUNNERY (KOZLOWSKI); COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY (FINCHER); MATT DILYARD (LACKNER); COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ATHLETICS (AKINOSUN)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JUST MY TYPE

→ *Interview by* DAN PATRICK

JACK NICKLAUS

GOLDEN MEMORIES

The 76-year-old reflects on winning his 18th and final major championship, the 1986 Masters, with his son on his bag, and the one champions dinner that made him squeamish.

DAN PATRICK: *Did you have issues getting into Augusta today?*

JACK NICKLAUS: No, I didn't have any issues. We had one funny guy who said, "We gotta scan your thing." Then he looked at me and said, "I don't think we need to scan that one."

DP: *What did you keep from your last Masters win, your sixth? Do you still have the putter? The plaid pants?*

JN: I obviously have the memories and the trophy. But the one thing I don't have, and it's the only golf club that I don't have from all the tournaments I've won, is the putter. I think one of my kids threw it out. It was in the golf room [at our house], and I think one of them must have said, "Oh, Dad doesn't use this thing anymore. You guys can have it." I think [my son] Steve did that with my white fang putter, and somebody else did it with the other one. We did find the white fang, but we never found the other one.

DP: *How much joy did you take out of that win at age 46, when everyone had started to write you off?*

JN: I took a lot of joy out of it. At the time I didn't think I could do anything anymore. I certainly didn't start the tournament very excitingly. I started with a 74, then I shot a 71 and then a 69. I didn't start well on Sunday, and then all of a sudden I birdied 9, 10 and 11. So I said, You never know. I started believing and I remembered how to play and I finished it off.

DP: *To have your son Jack Jr. on the bag must have been pretty special.*

JN: Having your son on the bag and making the moment about you and your son—I hope that's what I'm about. My son and all my kids and my grandkids have always been an important part of my life.

DP: *What do you miss about competing?*

JN: Competing. That's exactly what I miss. I love competing. I don't care what it is. Golf was my vehicle for competition. Even today, if I play golf with some of my friends, I'm about a four handicap. Every once in a while I'll find a little lightning in the bottle and shoot a 72 and destroy my handicap. I get a big kick out of that.

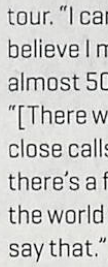
DP: *How did Jordan Spieth do with his menu [at the champions dinner]?*

JN: We had Texas barbecue, and it was excellent. He handled himself very well.

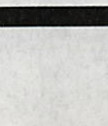
DP: *Did somebody have a bad menu over the years?*

JN: I don't think anyone has had a bad menu. *[Laughs.]* I think the toughest for most of us was Sandy Lyle's haggis [in 1989]. That was different. But we always have an alternate. □

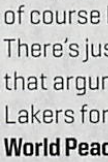
GUEST SHOTS
SAY WHAT?



I asked golfer **John Daly**, who turns 50 on April 28, what he would have said if I had told him 25 years ago that he would be soon be eligible to play on the senior tour. "I can't even believe I made it to almost 50," Daly said. "[There were] a lot of close calls. But I think there's a few people in the world who can also say that." . . . UConn women's basketball coach **Geno Auriemma**

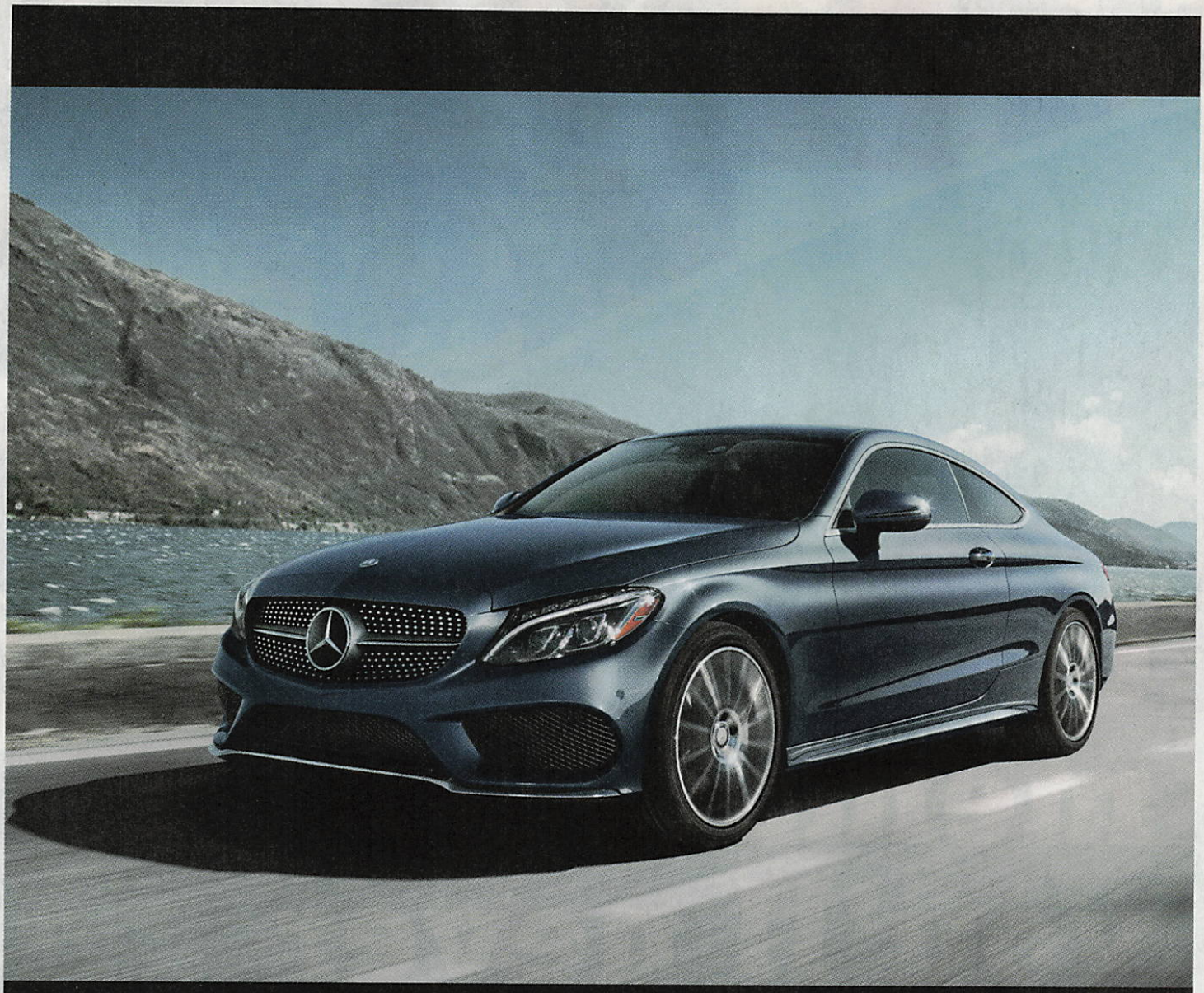


described how he feels about being compared with John Wooden: "I hate it," Auriemma said. "[People] are going to always say, 'you're not John Wooden,' and I'm always gonna go, 'Well of course I'm not.' There's just no winning that argument." . . . Lakers forward **Metta World Peace** told me there's less bravado



in the NBA: "It's not like it was with MJ and Kobe. Nowadays guys are scared to talk trash because I don't think they can back it up. I miss those days when you could just talk."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); AUGUSTA NATIONAL/GETTY IMAGES (NICKLAUS); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (DALY); JENNIFER POTTHEISER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (AURIEMMA); BRYAN STEFFY/GETTY IMAGES FOR SHOWTIME (PEACE)



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THE LURE OF FISHING

From Little Leaguer to high school star to big-league pitcher, Boston's **Rick Porcello** simply can't get enough fishing.

AS A STARTING PITCHER for the Boston Red Sox, Rick Porcello thrives on pinpoint control. He's looking for strikes on the mound—and off, while fishing for trout, steelhead, redfish and snook.

"I'm not a power pitcher; I rely on locating pitches well," says Porcello. "When you're casting, you have to be able to put your lure in the right location."

Porcello grew up in Chester, New Jersey, where he led his high school team to four consecutive state titles and earned numerous national awards. Besides baseball, Porcello spent plenty of time fishing with his dad and two brothers on a trout-stocked stream near his childhood home.

Porcello valued the camaraderie that angling builds. "I just loved being on the water with my brothers and my father and how fishing brought us together," he says. "It kind of grew into an obsession from there."

He indulges that obsession during the season, often hooking up with fishing guides on off-days when the Red Sox are on the road. "If the team doesn't have an off-day, I try to find a fly shop in the city where I can run by and see what they have," Porcello says.

Baseball comes first, but on at least one occasion he couldn't resist mixing business and pleasure. During a road trip a few years back, Porcello snuck in an early-morning outing for striped bass.

"My brother parked under the hotel, and we took the elevator to the garage so no one would see me walking through the lobby at 6 a.m. to go striper fishing," Porcello says, laughing. He wasn't pitching that night, and he made it back in plenty of time for the game. "We caught a bunch of fish, too. It was awesome."

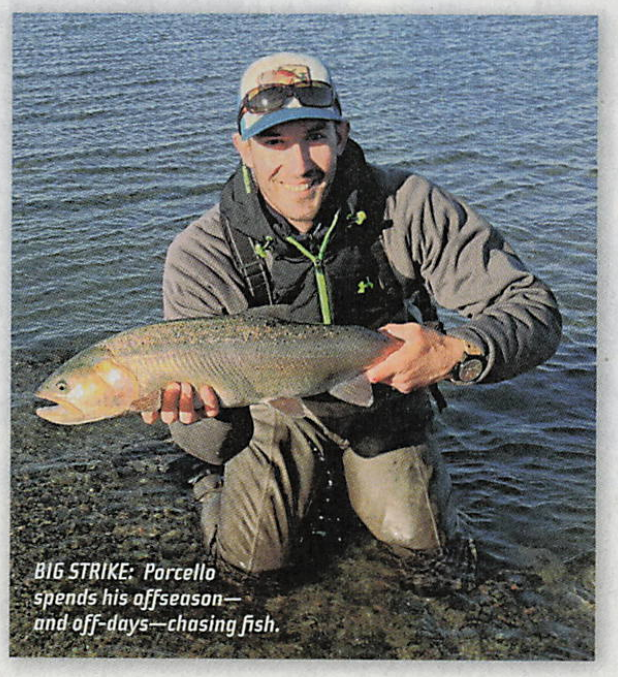
When Porcello came to Boston in 2015, it was a homecoming of sorts. His grandfather, Sam Dente, started his nine-year major league career with the 1947 Red Sox, who were led by Hall of Fame hitter and world-class angler Ted Williams.

"It's definitely cool that I get to play in Fenway Park where Ted Williams played, and I know a lot of the places he fished in Massachusetts and Florida," Porcello says.

Catching fish is a lot like facing big-league hitters: Both pursuits involve "a cat-and-mouse game," Porcello says, that pits foes in a one-on-one test of wills and skills. But the fishing experiences he cherishes most aren't solo; they're shared with family and friends.

Recently, Porcello fished a local river in Burlington, Vermont, with a brother and a buddy. The trio caught only one fish from dawn to dusk: a 10½-pound salmon that Porcello landed after an epic battle.

"It was one of the coolest catches I've made, because everybody helped," he recalls. As he chased the fish downstream, his companions helped him dodge boulders and track the salmon's run. "It was a team effort, and that made it a pretty special moment," Porcello says. "It was a lot of fun." —*Steven Hill*

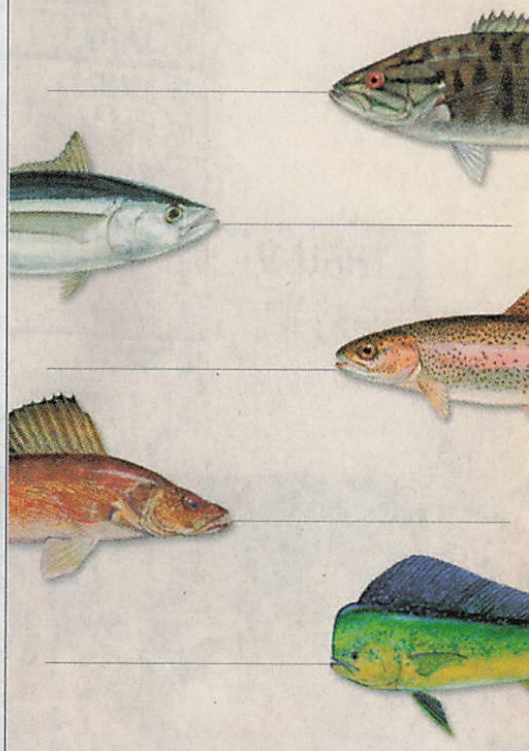


BIG STRIKE: Porcello spends his offseason—and off-days—chasing fish.

Photo courtesy of Rick Porcello

There are plenty of fish in the sea. Learn how to catch them all.

NAME THOSE FISH:
Smallmouth Bass, Walleye
Albacore, Dolphinfish,
Rainbow Trout



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#FirstCatch

UPSTART ENGLISHMAN DANNY WILLETT SLIPPED ON

THE 80TH MASTERS WILL BE REMEMBERED

MAJOR CAT

THE GREEN JACKET WITH A FLAWLESS FINAL ROUND, BUT

AS THE TOURNAMENT THAT JORDAN SPIETH THREW AWAY

ASTROPHE

BY ALAN SHIPNUCK

Photograph by
Fred Vuich
For Sports Illustrated

LAID LOW
Spieth was bidding to become the fourth player to win the title back-to-back, but on Sunday he went from five shots up to three down in 40 minutes.

TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

As if losing wasn't hard enough, Spieth had to slip the green jacket on Willett, whose bogey-free 67 matched the low round of the day.

NO GOLF course is haunted quite like Augusta National. Swirling through Amen Corner are the ghosts of Masters past, their presence as palpable as the breezes that ruffle the dogwoods. There's a dark side to all of the Masters' mythmaking, with so many Sundays defined by suffering. Ken Venturi's six three-putts, Ed Sneed's 72nd hole try that teetered on the lip of the cup but would not fall, Curtis Strange's chunked chip into the water, Scott Hoch's yip from 18 inches, Greg Norman's blown six-shot lead, Rory McIlroy's misadventure in the woods—they're all as much a part of the fabric of the tournament as the green jacket itself. On Sunday night three-time champion Nick Faldo stood behind the clubhouse and tried to make sense of another wrenching finish. "You can't escape the past here," he said. "Every memory is bolted on to another memory. For every great moment there's a tragic one too. That's what makes this place what it is."

It was 20 years ago that Faldo won his third jacket, but that tournament will always be remembered for Norman's agonizing collapse, just as the 80th Masters will always be more about who lost than who won. Danny Willett prevailed on Sunday by playing the round of his life, and the 28-year-old Englishman has the game and the fortitude to enjoy a long, fruitful career. But this was the Masters that Jordan Spieth kicked away. Riding a string of four consecutive birdies, he arrived on the 10th tee five strokes in the clear and on the precipice of so much history: With a second victory Spieth would have matched the number of Masters wins of Byron Nelson, Ben Hogan, Tom Watson and Seve Ballesteros; he would have become only the fourth player to win back-to-back green jackets; a third major championship victory at 22 years and nine months would have put him almost a year ahead of Jack Nicklaus's pace in winning a record 18 majors. But Spieth proceeded to go bogey, bogey, quadruple bogey, rinsing his tee shot at the par-3 12th hole and then fatting the ensuing pitch into the water. Around the same time Willett was making

KOHJIRO KINNO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

AS WILLETT STAGED HIS FURIOUS COMEBACK, HIS BROTHER, P.J., WAS LIVE-TWEETING FROM ACROSS THE POND.

P J Willett
@P_J_Willett

@Danny_Willett you still owe me a birthday present. I'd like a jacket. A green one.#TheMasters #bbcgolf
4:11 PM - 10 Apr 2016

P J Willett
@P_J_Willett

Come on, Danny. You beaut genius. COOOOMMMEEE OOONNNNNN#TheMasters #bbcgolf
5:30 PM - 10 Apr 2016

ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Spieth turned to Greller and said, "Buddy, it seems like we're **COLLAPSING."**

birdie at the 13th and 14th holes. The denouement was stunning in its swiftness; in the space of 40 minutes Willett made up eight strokes on Spieth, and then he birdied the 16th hole to plunge the knife even deeper. At one point Spieth turned to his caddie, Michael Greller, and said, "Buddy, it seems like we're collapsing."

The breakdown was total: physical, mental and attitudinal. Spieth blamed his bogey at the 10th hole on a shift in approach—instead of continuing to attack he began playing prevent defense, and a passive swing with a six-iron left him in the front bunker. Willett, meanwhile, was tidying up his two-putt birdie on the par-5 13th. The lead was down to three. For much of this Masters, Spieth's swing had been out of sequence, his arms getting trapped behind his body on the downswing, and it happened again when he entered the three-hole stretch of Amen Corner, as he push-sliced his tee shot at the 11th into the trees. Up ahead on the 14th Willett stuffed a 9-iron to four feet. Three holes back, Spieth did well to leave himself an eight-footer for par. The putter has always been the difference-maker for him, but Spieth knew he was leaning too heavily on his moneymaker. "Can't do that every single round," he had said the night before, and on 11 he burned the left edge. So the lead was down to a stroke as Spieth stepped up to the scariest little shot in golf.

He chose a nine-iron at the 155-yard par-3 and after consulting with Greller agreed that a hard draw was the right play. Standing over the ball something went terribly wrong: Spieth got it in his mind to play a fade, even though it was that exact shot, on this same hole in 2014, that had led to another ball in the hazard, part of a mid-round swoon during which he lost a two-stroke lead with 11 holes to play in his Masters debut. "I didn't take that extra deep breath and really focus on my line," Spieth said. "Instead I just put a quick swing on it." His ball landed well short of the green and rolled back into Rae's Creek. Rather than going to the drop zone, Spieth chose a spot that left an 80-yard pitch. He laid the sod over it, the ball barely making it to the water. It's not an overstatement to call it one of the worst pressure shots in golf history. "I'm not really sure what happened," Spieth said. This was honesty, not deflection.

As for Willett, he didn't make a bogey during his airtight 67, and at the par-3 16th his cold-blooded 8-iron to seven feet and subsequent putt were the shots of the tournament. For the last two decades Fleet Street has lamented a lost generation of Next Faldos, but now Willett is in the vanguard of an English invasion: Five of the lads finished tied for 10th or better at this Masters. "Danny grew up with a lot of talented players," says his father-in-law, Paul Harris. "They're all about the same physically, but the difference with him is here"—he pointed at his head—"and here"—pointing at his heart.

Golf swings can be fixed, but it's harder to heal what's on the inside. "This one will hurt," Spieth said. "It will take awhile." It can take longer than that. Norman, at 41, was never the same player after Augusta National broke his heart. Faldo was too polite to mention him by name on Sunday, but he did say, "A lot of players, when they lose here, they carry the scars forever."

WHAT MADE Spieth's collapse so stunning was that it was the third straight day he had squandered control of the tournament. He opened his title defense with a 66 despite hitting only 12 greens in regulation—"A clinical display of scoring," said his playing partner Paul Casey—and when Spieth birdied the 8th hole of the second round he led by five shots, evoking his record-tying, four-shot victory a year earlier. But Spieth had been fighting his swing all along, and in the relentless winds his discomfort became noticeable. He was fidgety over the ball and backed away so often to wipe his sweaty palms that, inevitably, the spoof Twitter feed @greller_towel was created. Spieth bogeyed four of the final 10 holes and the 74 sliced his lead to a lone stroke, over McIlroy.

Lurking in an eighth-place tie was Willett, four back. His wife, Nicole, had been due to give birth to their first child on Masters Sunday, and Danny was resigned to skipping his second trip to Augusta. But the golf gods, he said on Sunday night, "listened to my prayers and [my son] came early." On the

P J Willett
@P_J_Willett

If the boy does what he should, I will be able to say 'I've shared a bath with a Masters winners - brilliant#bbcgolf

6:09 PM - 10 Apr 2016

European tour, where he has won five times, Willett is known as a tireless worker, but for more than a week he hardly touched a club while caring for Nicole and baby Zach. He blew into Augusta late on Monday; as the 89th and final player to register, his caddie was given a jumpsuit numbered 89, a lovely omen given that Nicklaus got that number before his remarkable comeback victory 30 years ago. However much Willett missed his wife and child back in England, he confided to his old coach at Jacksonville (Ala.) State, James Hobb, "I'm so glad to be here—I can finally get some sleep!"

The narrative of Spieth's season had been his battle against burnout after a winter of cash-grabs that took him to China, Australia, the Bahamas, Abu Dhabi and Singapore. Spieth seemed amused by the chatter about his so-called slump; shortly before the Masters he splurged on a new Range Rover, telling a friend, "I'm rewarding myself for my mediocrity." But by the end of the third round it was impossible not to detect physical and mental fatigue. After making a careless double bogey at the 11th, he was one over for the day, but Spieth dug deep to birdie three of the next four holes. His lead was back to a commanding four strokes. Once again he squandered it with a sloppy finish, push-slicing a pair of tee shots and ending the round bogey, double bogey for a 73 that left him a stroke ahead of 24-year-old Masters rookie Smylie Kaufman (who shouldn't be confused with his brother, Luckie). Asked how he would clear his head, Spieth said, "Probably go break something really quick." In fact, he already had—it was a record seventh straight round that concluded with his holding the outright Masters lead.

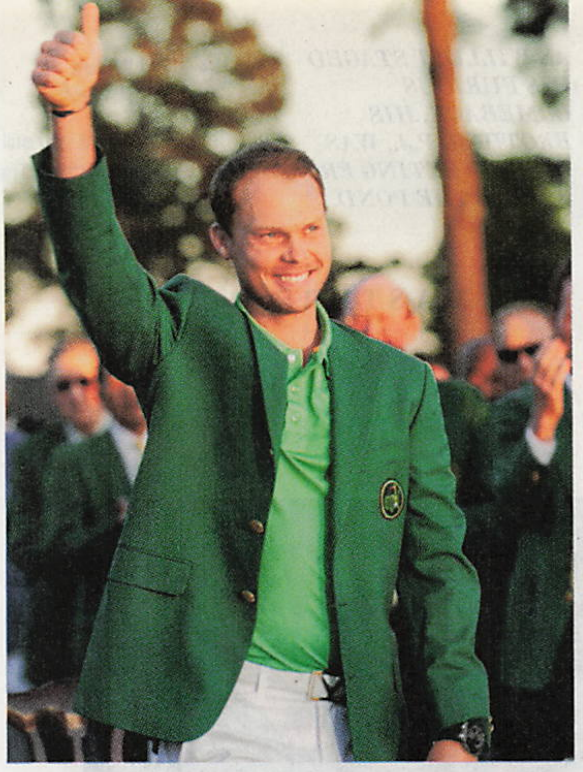
With a hard-fought 72, Willett moved up to a tie for fifth, three back. The firm, fast setup was perfectly suited for his brand of precise, calculating golf. Willett would make only 13 birdies on the week, the lowest total by a Masters champion this century, but minimizing mistakes is the key to thriving at a major. "Utterly unflappable" is how Faldo describes his countryman.

SPIETH, FOR all of his success, still struggles with the volatility in his game. Had Dustin Johnson nudged home his eagle putt on the final hole of last year's U.S. Open, Spieth never would have lived down his double bogey on the 71st hole. (In fairness, he sandwiched it with crucial birdies.) Johnson's three-putt handed Spieth the win and sent him to the Old Course trying to become the second player to win the first three legs of the Grand Slam, joining Hogan. Tied for the lead after a birdie at the 70th hole, he missed an eight-foot par putt at the Road Hole and then made two awful swings at 18 when he had to have a birdie.

His wildest ride of all came on Sunday; beginning at the 5th, Spieth went nine consecutive holes without making a par. It is to his everlasting credit that he fought so hard after his blowup, with birdies on 13 and 15 giving him a glimmer of hope, but he missed an eight-footer for birdie on 16 that would have brought him within one. He still could have forced a playoff with two closing birdies, but a weak approach at the 17th left him bunkered. When he failed to jar that shot, a delirious celebration touched off across two continents, as Nicole had stayed up deep into the night to watch the telecast.

The victory pushed Willett to ninth in the World Ranking. In this blockbuster year for the sport, he will most likely represent England at the Rio Olympics, and he'll be a stalwart at the Ryder Cup. As Spieth tries to regroup, the Masters' long history offers some solace. In 1959, Arnold Palmer led by five with seven to play but triple-bogeyed the 12th (with a 6-iron!) and lost to Art Wall Jr. The King came back the next year to take the Masters as well as the U.S. Open. Then again, McIlroy coughed up a four-shot Sunday lead in 2011 and has been a woebegone presence around Augusta ever since; the birdieless 77 he shot while paired with Spieth on Saturday was the latest disaster. McIlroy did rebound to win the '11 U.S. Open and has tacked on three other major titles, but even at 26, it's impossible not to wonder if he'll join Norman, Lee Trevino, Johnny Miller, Ernie Els and other megatalents who seemed to have the perfect games for Augusta National but were unable to exorcise their demons there.

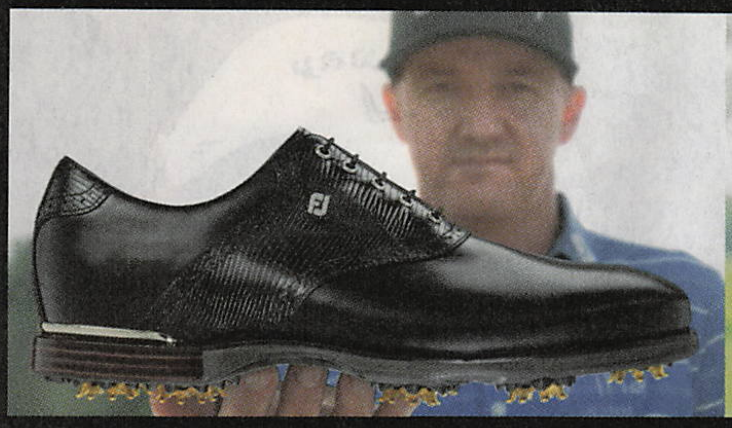
At least Spieth has won his Masters, but on Sunday night even that was a mixed blessing—as defending champ he was compelled to present Willett his green jacket. It's hard to imagine a crueler ceremony in all of sports. When it mercifully ended, and after Spieth had displayed a winning grace in answering questions about his failures, he made his way through the old clubhouse, ashen and glassy-eyed, a dead man walking with whom no one dared to make eye contact. Once outside, he started to slip into the sanctuary of a waiting car, but at that moment Faldo appeared like a specter. Spieth listened emotionlessly to the words of encouragement and then disappeared into the night, leaving behind so much history, good and bad. It was 39 years ago that Clifford Roberts, Augusta National's retired chairman, shot himself dead on the club grounds, down by Ike's Pond. The old-timers who work in the clubhouse will tell you they still think of him when the floorboards creak. □



ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

FATHER'S DAY

The first Englishman to win the Masters in 20 years, Willett wouldn't have even been at Augusta had son Zach not been born early.



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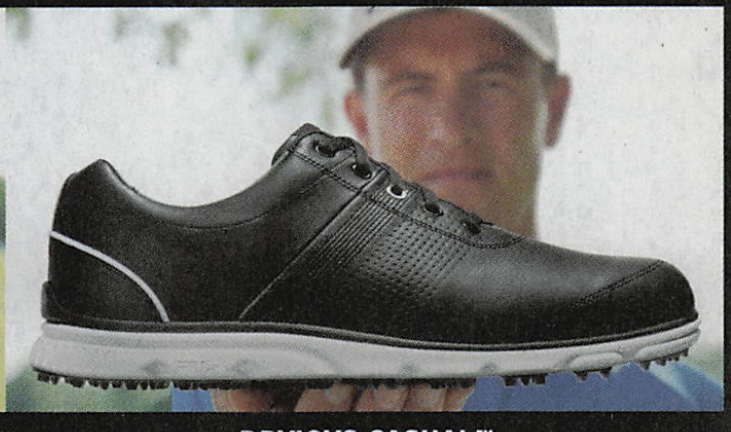

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GOLDE
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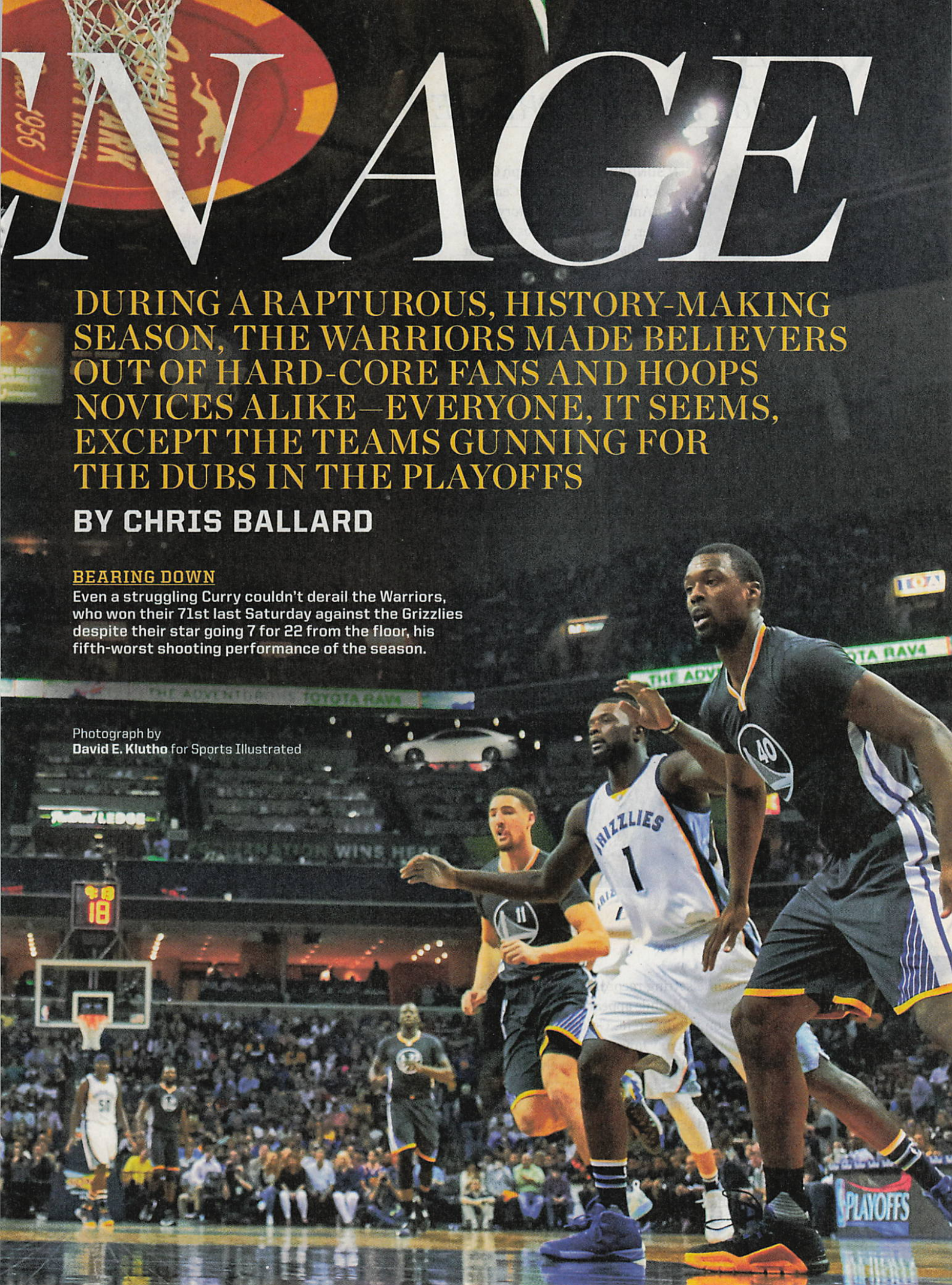
NAGE

DURING A RAPTUROUS, HISTORY-MAKING SEASON, THE WARRIORS MADE BELIEVERS OUT OF HARD-CORE FANS AND HOOPS NOVICES ALIKE—EVERYONE, IT SEEMS, EXCEPT THE TEAMS GUNNING FOR THE DUBS IN THE PLAYOFFS

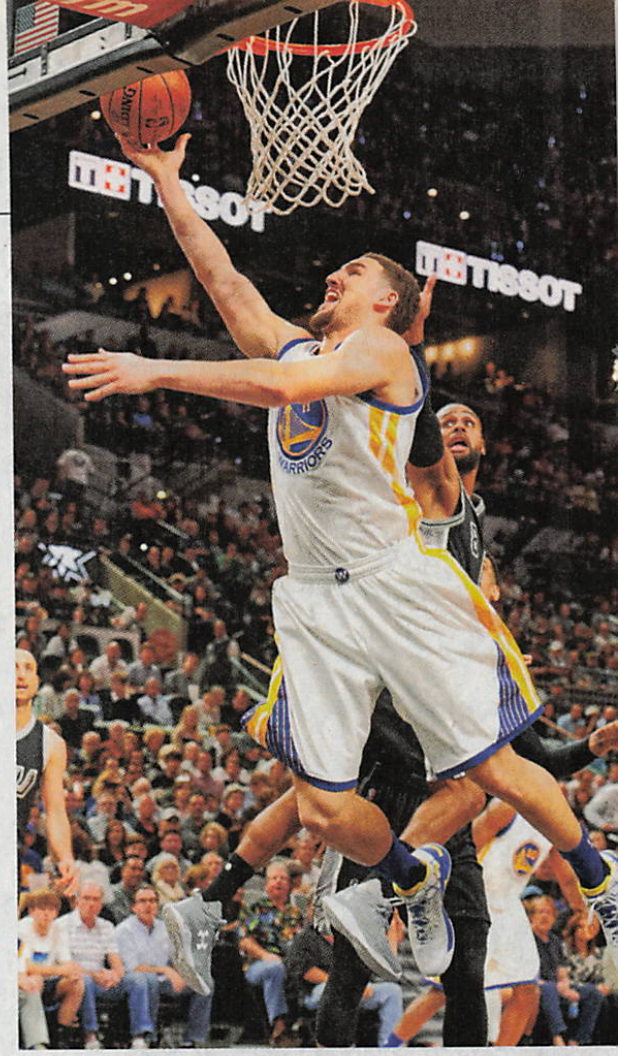
BY CHRIS BALLARD



BEARING DOWN
Even a struggling Curry couldn't derail the Warriors, who won their 71st last Saturday against the Grizzlies despite their star going 7 for 22 from the floor, his fifth-worst shooting performance of the season.

Photograph by
David E. Klutho for Sports Illustrated

NBA
2016 PLAYOFF PREVIEW



ON SUNDAY NIGHT, as Steph Curry took the floor at the AT&T Center in San Antonio to chase history, Beth Keiser, a thousand miles away in Asheville, N.C., sat in a sports bar for one of the few times in her life. Beth is 78 years old, a retired English professor at Guilford College. Her husband taught religion; her son moved to Ghana and instructs locals in sustainable gardening. In a long, full life, she has rarely thought much about basketball.

This season, however, Beth became hooked on the Warriors when, by luck, she saw part of a game during a dinner party. She was riveted by Steph Curry, and began DVRing Golden State games to share with others. Soon enough she was staying up till 1:30, agonizing over outcomes. She emailed friends, including this reporter's mother, to ensure that they too were witnessing the grace of this unselfish team, the "contagious pleasure" they took in the game, as she puts it.

Normally sports must intrude upon the real world to capture the attention of people like Beth. Joe Paterno, Ray Rice, Jason Collins. But here we have a rare phenomenon: Sports atheists converted solely on account of the virtuosity of a star and his team.

"Light years ahead of probably every other team," said Warriors owner Joe Lacob recently, in a rare moment of hubris from an organization that prides itself on humility. But there's truth to his comment. Across the league, franchises have rushed to mimic the magic. But how can you replicate Steph? The warmups-turned-pay-per-view. The OKC half-court heave. The flitting and weaving and ankle breaking. He will win the MVP again; he could just as easily be Most Improved Player. He is on track to shoot 40/50/90 while setting records unlikely to be broken by anyone not named Steph Curry. All while appearing to live in the moment.

AS THE WINS PILED UP, EVERY WARRIORS LOSS BECAME REASON FOR CONCERN. THEY WERE NEVER ALLOWED A BAD DAY.

WHO'S THE BOSS?
Well, it didn't matter. Thompson (top) and his teammates thrived from the start under Walton (above, left) and didn't miss a beat when Kerr (above, right) returned to the bench in January.

From the start this season felt different. Golden State opened with a record 24 straight wins, forcing many fans to care about the NBA a good two months early. In the process Draymond Green evolved from defensive maniac to all-around maniac. He played point-forward—and at times point-center—becoming the first player in NBA history to finish a season with 1,000 points, 500 rebounds, 500 assists, 100 steals and 100 blocks. He leads the league in plus-minus—not to mention in flexing and bellowing "AND ONNNE!" after every attempt. He is not, we now know, a robot.

The only team to have the Warriors' number, strangely enough, was the Lakers, who beat Golden State twice. O.K., so the first time was in an

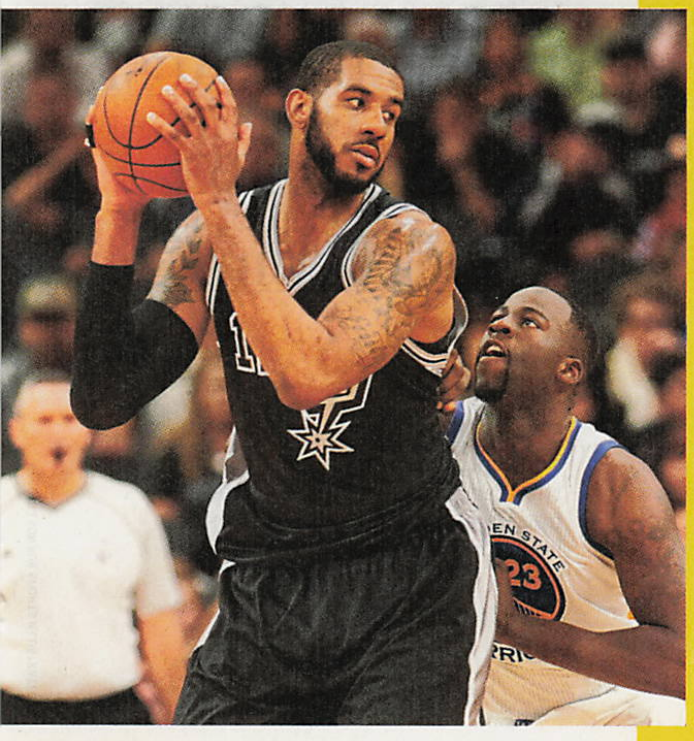
GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (3); CHRIS KEANE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WALTON)

exhibition game—the Warriors actually had a losing record in preseason—and the second came when the team played at noon on a Sunday, after Steph chose to see a midnight showing of *Deadpool* the previous evening. Some of his teammates headed off on less-cinematic adventures, leading media folks to note that of all the assumptions in the league, not one is more assured than Los Angeles on a Saturday night remains undefeated.

As the season wore on, and the wins piled up, every Warriors loss became reason for concern. They were never allowed to have a bad day. The players dissected any stumble. *Ah, that game against Detroit.* Such is the price of chasing perfection.

Gradually all other NBA story lines receded. Kobe's final season stumbled along, a distant hum in the background. Rookie Karl-Anthony Towns convincingly impersonated Tim Duncan, but few paid much mind. Russell Westbrook averaged a near triple double and may not receive a single

ONE BIG PROBLEM
Thanks to the 6' 11" Aldridge and his sweet midrange stroke, the Spurs can give any foe—the Warriors included—matchup fits.



HOW THE WARRIORS COULD CONCEIVABLY, POSSIBLY, MAYBE BE BEATEN IN THE PLAYOFFS:

SAN ANTONIO SPURS

For anyone tired of hearing that the Warriors are the greatest team ever assembled, that they have revolutionized basketball, that they have triggered a cultural phenomenon, that they're smarter than everybody else and more likeable and have *so much more fun*, then the Spurs are now your team.

The Cavaliers, Clippers and Thunder all have a chance to topple Golden State, and record arguably the biggest upset in NBA history, but get real. The Spurs—Golden State's likely Western Conference finals opponent—are the only legitimate hope.

The Warriors talk a lot about their rhythm, which they call their "flow," and for the past 10 months no one has been able to disrupt it. The Grizzlies did, in last year's West semifinals, and the Cavs did also, in the Finals. Since then the Dubs have dropped a game here and there, but their flow has continued unabated.

The Warriors in general and Steph Curry in particular admit they feed off confidence. The confidence they earned from the championship last season led to more confidence from the streak that started this season which led to more confidence from their current six-month joyride. The team that beats them is the team that shakes them—the team that makes them feel fallible again.

The Spurs cannot outgun the Warriors, but they can make them clank a few shots, if such a thing is possible. What Golden State has been to offense this season, San Antonio has been to defense. The Spurs have allowed just 92.9 points per game, almost three fewer than any other team. In the NBA good offense typically trumps good defense, which is why the Warriors would be favored in a series. But the Spurs' D can rattle anybody.

So how would they do it? Downsizing, with Boris Diaw spending more time at center and Tim Duncan more time on the bench, as LaMarcus Aldridge punishes counterparts; switching pick-and-rolls, with Tony Parker and Danny Green hounding Curry and the bigs chasing him as well; Kawhi Leonard suffocating Klay Thompson. That was the recipe the Spurs employed in their second meeting with the Warriors, when they did what the Clippers, Thunder and Cavs could not: finish the damn game.

Leonard has taken his star turn this season, morphing from stopper to centerpiece, but this series will test him. He can't fade into the background anymore, the way he did in the first round against the Clippers last spring, deferring to the bygone Big Three. He has to piggyback the Spurs, on offense as well as defense, delivering at both ends every night. No one expects him to match missiles with Curry, but he can put up a string of 25-point performances. He proved as much all winter.

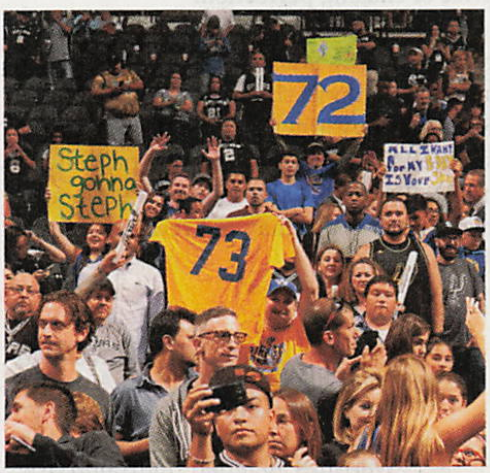
Many NBA players, plugged into their League Pass accounts, were demoralized by the Warriors. The Spurs, institutionally insulated from hysteria and immune to hype, kept grinding. They finished a tick below Golden State, and they couldn't care less if nobody noticed. While others were hand-wringing, they were searching for a way to beat the unbeatable team. If there's a formula, they're the best bet to find it. —*Lee Jenkins*

MVP vote. Instead the Warriors became a black hole, sucking up all our attention. In one week *The New York Times Magazine* put them on the cover, only to see *ESPN The Magazine* devote its entire issue to the team. (This is SI's second cover story in the past two months.) Then again, how much do you remember about the 1995–96 season, outside of the Bulls' traveling circus? Our hearts go out to that campaign's ignored stories—Damon Stoudamire's Rookie of the Year win, the Kings' surprise playoff appearance—and now, another season's worth of moments is lost to time.

Perhaps in time we'll also forget that the Warriors made it to midseason without their head coach. For Steve Kerr, off-season back surgery led to a second surgery which led to debilitating headaches. Kerr, as optimistic a man as you'll meet in sports, in what should have been one of the best times of his life, instead went to what he says was a dark place. Slowly the pain eased. Finally he returned to the bench, after Luke Walton led the team to a 39–4 record and ensured an off-season full of job offers (a striking result considering many wondered, before the season, if the team could survive the loss of last year's top assistant, Alvin Gentry, to the Pelicans).

As the world pressed in, the Warriors held their ground. Danielle Steel visited practice. Draymond Green appeared at a local Peet's to serve coffee, only to cause a craze, the line stretching two blocks hours before his arrival. Occasionally the wave crashed too hard. A railing broke in Utah as fans tried to reach Curry for autographs. In Toronto, during All-Star weekend, Curry's security guy, Ralph Walker, a former Oakland police officer, had to lead Steph on a dead sprint through a department store, running low like back in the days of a house raid, to escape a mob of fans. (Recently a friend of this reporter, who lives in Berkeley, became excited because his young daughter managed "eye contact" with Ayesha Curry at an event.)

In the final weeks seemingly everyone weighed in on the team. *They should rest their stars! Prepare for the playoffs. Screw that, go for the record.* Meanwhile, NBA alums, including Oscar Robertson and an assured Scottie Pippen, lectured us on how, back in the day,



A FRIEND BECAME EXCITED BECAUSE HIS DAUGHTER MANAGED "EYE CONTACT" WITH AYESHA CURRY.

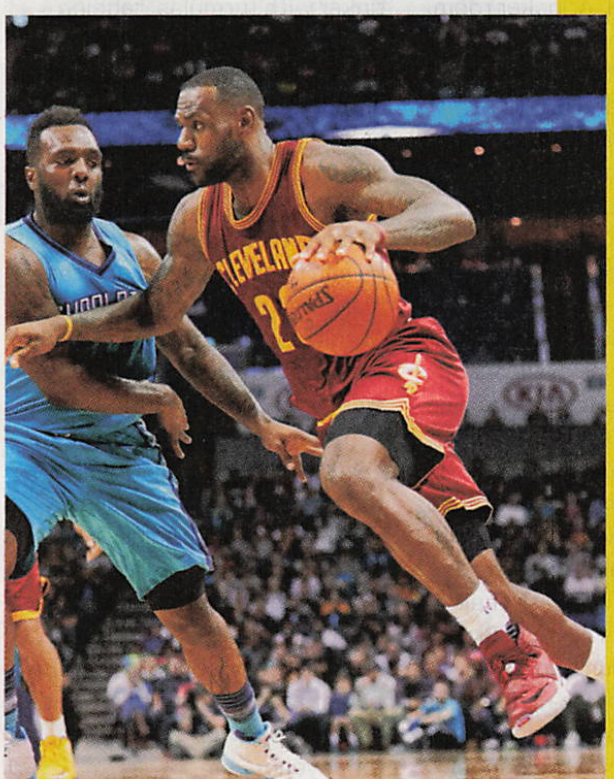
SPLASH AND THRASH
The 0 provided the highlights, but the Warriors were able to chase 73 because of suffocating D from the likes of Thompson (above, left).

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)

this Warriors team would have gotten absolutely smoked. Finally center Andrew Bogut, a caustic Australian, responded on Twitter. "My under 14 team in Melbourne Australia would have beat these @warriors 109-99," Bogut wrote. "Fat Jimmy would have locked down @StephenCurry30 !!!!"

How do you deal with the weight of history? Kerr brought in guest speakers, including the author Michael Lewis, who noted how important it is to have people around you who can help you stay grounded. GM Bob Myers read books at night when he couldn't sleep, then passed them on to coaches, firing through *The Boys in the Boat* before giving it to Ron Adams. Myers knew he was supposed to be elated at the team's success but says it only made him more anxious. His wife, Kristen, says that when the Warriors hosted the Spurs last Thursday, with 70 wins on the line, it was the most nervous she'd seen her husband in

ROYAL PAIN
James should have help this postseason, but he showed last year he's capable of making a series interesting all by himself.



CHRIS KEANE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

HOW THE WARRIORS COULD CONCEIVABLY, POSSIBLY, MAYBE GET BEATEN IN THE PLAYOFFS:

CLEVELAND CAVALIERS

There have been cryptic tweets. There have been team meetings. A coach has been fired. There was an Instagram post by the franchise player posing as a morose cartoon Batman. There is uncertainty clouding the future in Cleveland, and angst in the present. But in the end, there is still LeBron.

From a basketball standpoint, LeBron James remains a cheat code. He is the size of Bill Russell with a point guard's vision and the power of Karl Malone. He's averaging 25.5 points, 8.1 rebounds and 7.4 assists since the All-Star break. He is the only player in the NBA who can make Draymond Green's versatility look ordinary, and he outplayed Curry through most of last year's Finals.

Yes, Golden State destroyed this Cleveland team in January, but I'm not sure a matchup this June would be so lopsided. Golden State will have to survive wars with two of the other teams on this list, and they'll have to stay healthy. The Cavs should have a much easier road.

Whether they go big or small, Cleveland has more talent to throw at the Warriors than any team in the league. Tristan Thompson can punish them on the glass, and Kevin Love can chip in from the perimeter. Iman Shumpert is a capable foil for Klay Thompson. Kyrie Irving can do damage on offense, and his defensive shortcomings can be hidden on Harrison Barnes. J.R. Smith. . . . Well, he can't play any worse than he did last year. And while nobody is stopping Curry, Matthew Dellavedova is the most obnoxious defender this side of Chris Paul, so that's a start. The Cavs can make these games ugly, and that's the first step to beating the Warriors.

But mostly, this is about LeBron. Imagine how disgusted he must be reading this, a series of pieces whose premise is that any scenario in which the Warriors lose should be considered theoretical.

So the ball is in the King's court now. Toward the end of last year's Finals, LeBron announced that he wasn't concerned. "I feel confident because I'm the best player in the world," he said after a loss. "It's that simple." At the time, it was that simple. Now nobody is so sure.

Given the sudden rise of Curry, there's a real chance that LeBron will be known more for what he didn't win than the titles he did. There are plenty of people mocking and doubting him. It's not all that different from where he was in Miami once, when the Heat had lost to the Mavericks in the 2011 Finals and were roundly considered a failure. Back then, the basketball world wondered in hushed tones about LeBron's future—until he went off and dominated the Finals the following season.

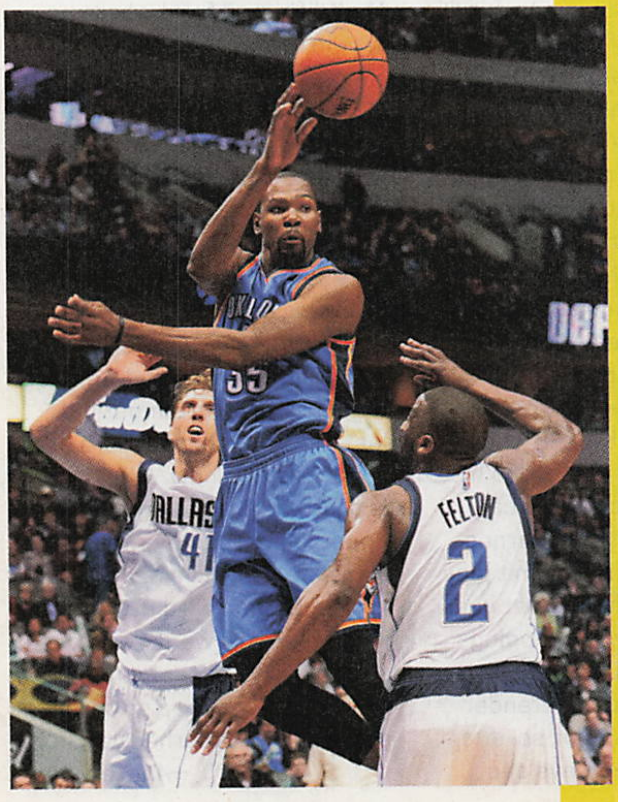
I don't know whether LeBron has it in him to do that against Golden State. He almost did last year, but the Warriors are a better team now. All I know is that LeBron has no better opportunity to cement his place in history than in a head-to-head matchup with Curry. And if the Warriors want to go down as the greatest team of all time, they'll have to go through a pissed-off superhero to do it.

—Andrew Sharp

a long time. Hoping to lighten the mood, she suggested during the game that they go on the Dance Cam together. Bob did not laugh.

The Warriors won that game, just as they won two nights later in Memphis after being down 10 in the fourth quarter, and just as they won 92–86 in San Antonio on Sunday in a game that Kerr later compared, in a quiet moment, with a "playoff war." The win tied the Bulls for 72 wins (their shot at 73 came in the season finale at home against the Grizzlies three days later, after this issue closed) and spoiled San Antonio's hopes of an undefeated home record. It also cemented Curry's competitive legend—he scored 37 points, many of them in absurd fashion—while reinforcing what we already know about the team as it heads into the postseason. Namely: As go Curry and Green, so go the Warriors; offensive magic aside, the team wins when it plays D and limits turnovers; and don't ever

THUNDERSTRUCK
Durant averaged 36.3 points against the Warriors this season—but Oklahoma City dropped all three matchups.



GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

HOW THE WARRIORS COULD CONCEIVABLY, POSSIBLY, MAYBE GET BEATEN IN THE PLAYOFFS:

WESTERN WILD CARDS

Among all NBA teams the Clippers have the best odds . . . of embroiling the Warriors in a brawl before Game 1 that results in mass suspensions.

The rivalry—almost certain to be rekindled in the second round—remains the most volatile in the league, and while it has mellowed a bit recently with Golden State's dominance and Blake Griffin's absence, Griffin is back and a playoff series will restore tension. If Griffin's quad injury limits him in any substantial way, the Clippers have no shot. But if he is at or near full strength, they have, well, a puncher's chance.

The Clippers lost all four games with the Warriors this season, but they blew 10-point fourth-quarter leads in two of them. There are a couple ways to look at that. 1) The Clips can't finish the Dubs even when everything is going their way. 2) They are closer than you think. Within the L.A. locker room, players believe in their formula against Golden State: using DeAndre Jordan and Griffin at center in small-ball lineups, switching pick-and-rolls relentlessly and unleashing Jordan on Steph Curry when Chris Paul isn't hounding him.

Two years ago the Clippers ousted the Warriors in the first round, and that was in the midst of the Donald Sterling fiasco. The principals haven't changed much, even if the outlook has. The Clippers need Griffin to heal, Paul to saddle Curry with foul trouble, J.J. Redick and Jamal Crawford to set arenas on fire with their shooting. And a Draymond Green suspension wouldn't hurt.

Clippers coach Doc Rivers uses the term "emotional hijack" when players succumb to their anger. Usually he employs the phrase when discussing his own team. In this case the Clips have to aggravate the Warriors—which they've proven capable of doing.

Let's assume the Warriors eventually vanquish the Clippers. They'd be on track to face the Spurs in a dream conference finals. But what if it's the Thunder, imbued with confidence from a second-round surprise?

With Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook, the Thunder can score with the Warriors. Their problem is slowing them. The OKC defense, while solid, is not elite. Like the Clippers, the Thunder can play small with Durant at the four, and they can switch pick-and-rolls, with Serge Ibaka hopping out on Curry.

But Oklahoma City has also looked good with bigger lineups featuring Enes Kanter and Steven Adams. The Thunder are deeper than the Clippers and can tinker with formulas, tabbing Andre Roberson for his defense, Anthony Morrow for his shooting or Dion Waiters for a combination of both. But all those players carry risk. The Thunder will likely rely most on Roberson to blanket the perimeter, but he can't shoot reliably and the Warriors could give him the Tony Allen treatment, sagging off him and clogging the paint to impede Westbrook and Durant.

In the end Russ and KD will have to simultaneously deliver the best series of their lives. They'll have to outshine Curry and Klay Thompson. They'll have to hit the clutch baskets that eluded the Thunder all season. They are still the best duo in the NBA, two of the top five players in the league. They won't be an easy out for anyone. —L.J.

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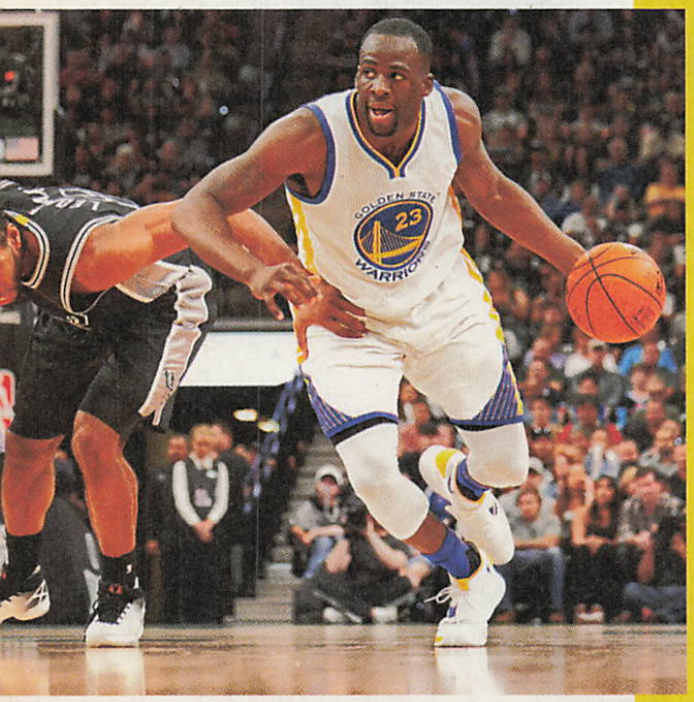
Stephen Curry. League MVP

fail to contest a Curry shot, even when it's from 60-odd feet (the distance from which Curry banked one in at the end of the third quarter against the Spurs, only to have the basket waved off).

Afterward Curry clutched the ball, refusing to let go of the memento, or the feeling. This magic season, and the record, was, he pointed out, "an opportunity that may never come again." Klay Thompson used the word "surreal." Kerr tried to put into perspective what it's like to play for, and then coach, the two best teams in NBA history. Meanwhile, Green, wearing flip-flops, sweat still on his forehead, made one thing clear. "It's an accomplishment," he said of the win. "THE accomplishment is 73."

By the time you read this, we'll know which it is: *an* or *the*. For new converts like Keiser, however, this isn't about wins, or stats or accomplishments. Rather, she says she watches the Warriors for the simplest of reasons: joy. Theirs at playing the game; hers in watching them do it. □

IRON MAN
Green set a career high in minutes played in 2015-16, but the Dubs can't afford a repeat of the '15 Finals, when his back was balky.



HOW THE WARRIORS COULD CONCEIVABLY, POSSIBLY, MAYBE GET BEATEN IN THE PLAYOFFS:

BAD LUCK

Nobody needs Captain Obvious to come through and remind everyone that a Steph Curry injury could derail everything. But if we're surveying potential nightmares at the end of a dream season, let's be honest about this: Injuries are the biggest threat on the board.

Well injuries, plus the very real possibility of a Joe Lacob Ted Talk on what Gregg Popovich can learn from venture capitalists. Also, we still don't know exactly what happened with Draymond Green in the Oklahoma City locker room back in February, but a mid-Finals meltdown would be less than ideal.

For now, though, we'll focus on the most apparent catastrophes lurking out there for Golden State. This team is great for two reasons. First, Curry is one of the best players of all time. He may not officially be in that conversation yet, but he will be in a few years. And if the Warriors lose him, obviously, it's over.

The other force driving this Golden State season is the best chemistry the NBA has ever seen. On defense almost everyone can switch and guard multiple positions. On offense the Warriors' passing overwhelms opponents and their shooting at every position makes them more or less unguardable. It all adds up to a lineup that nobody can stop. The flip side of that equation is interesting, though.

If chemistry is this elemental to the team's success, then removing one piece makes the entire formula vulnerable. Take Andre Iguodala. His shooting helps spread the floor on offense, while his versatility on defense allows the Warriors to put Green at center without missing a beat. If there were any questions about Iguodala's value, those ended when he missed 16 of 24 games to end the year, and teams realized they could hide weaker defenders on Harrison Barnes. (Three of the Dubs' losses came in those 16 games.)

There are other potential risks too. Andrew Bogut is on the wrong side of 30, and he's a perpetual injury candidate. (He hasn't played more than 70 games in a season since 2007-08, when he was 23.) His backup, Festus Ezeli, only recently came back to the court after missing 31 games with a knee injury. Barnes sprained an ankle in November, and he was out until January.

None of the injuries derailed Golden State during the regular season, so maybe it won't matter in the playoffs. In fact, it probably won't. Curry is still good enough to elevate Golden State past anyone. Whatever happens, I will not go on record doubting the Warriors in 2016.

If you'll remember, though, that the most vulnerable this team looked came during the beginning of the NBA Finals last year, when Green was battling mysterious back issues. We may never know what was wrong. All that's certain is that Green stopped shooting, trapping Curry started working and for a few games there, the Warriors' offense froze.

It worked out in the end for the Dubs—but only when Green's back loosened up and Kerr inserted a healthy Iguodala into the starting lineup. What happens if they don't have those luxuries this year? —A.S.

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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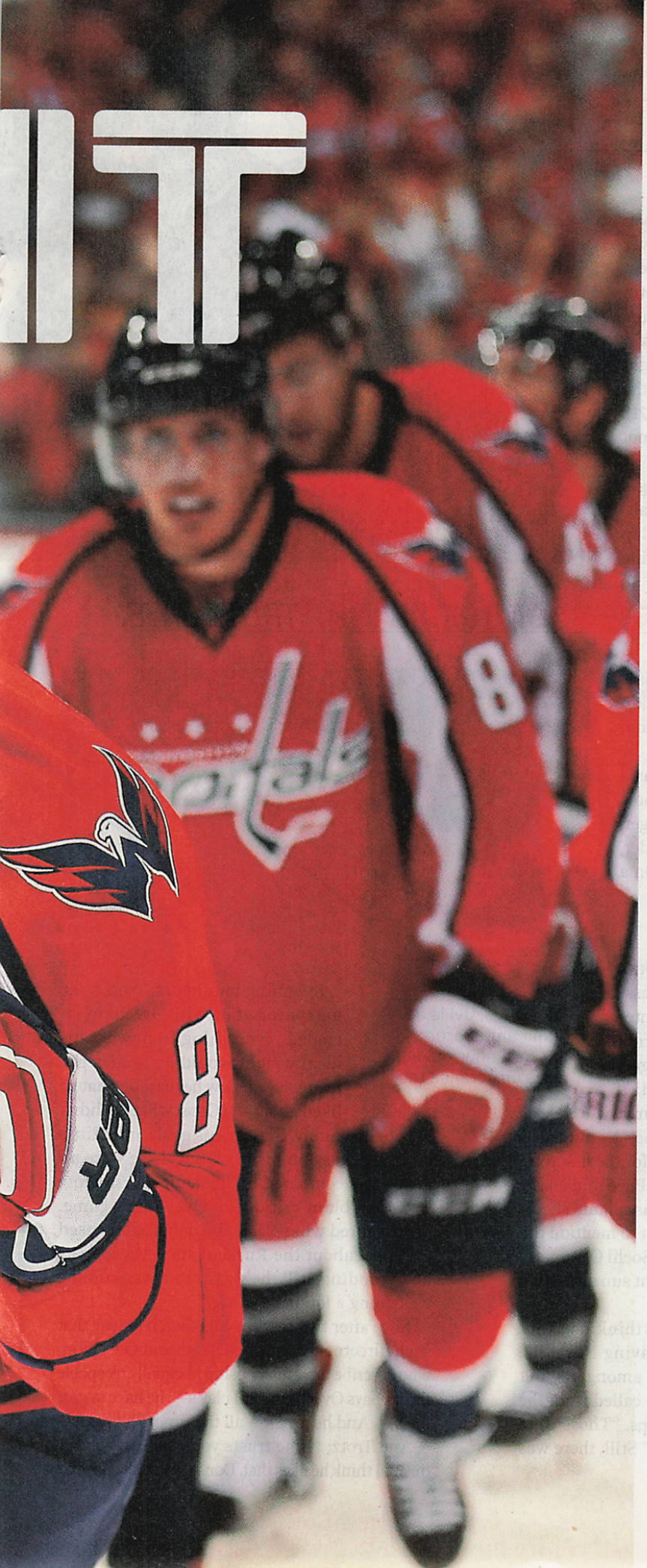
THE GREAT WA

NUMBER 8 HAS PLAYED 11 SEASONS IN THE NHL WITHOUT WINNING A STANLEY CUP. BUT THIS YEAR ALEX OVECHKIN HAS EXPANDED HIS GAME AND FINALLY HAS THE RIGHT TEAMMATES TO PUT THE CROWNING TOUCH ON HIS STELLAR CAREER

BY ALEX PREWITT

Photograph by
Patrick Smith/Getty Images

O CAPTAIN!
Ovechkin is firmly in charge of his team, leading with irrepressible enthusiasm but also a new maturity.



NHL 2016 PLAYOFF PREVIEW

BEFORE HIS ride reached the Japanese restaurant on the California coast, Alex Ovechkin already knew how dinner with Wayne Gretzky would go. "I'm going to ask him a lot of questions," Ovechkin said in the car. Meeting the Great One was not an opportunity for the Great Eight to waste.

True to his promise, the Capitals winger spent that night in mid-March hopscotching through topics, gleaning whatever he could from an idol, yes, but also peering into his own future. How did Gretzky manage his body after turning 30, which Ovechkin did last September? How did Gretzky feel hoisting four Stanley Cups, something Ovechkin hasn't done once? "How he trained, how he played, all different stuff," Ovechkin says. At some point he started sheepishly prefacing requests with, "Is it all right if I ask one more?" As dinner ended after several hours, Ovechkin requested that Gretzky stick around a little longer, feeling there was still more ground to cover.

This amused Gretzky. Such enthusiasm, he told Ovechkin, reminded him of the first time he met Gordie Howe. "I could've asked questions for two days," Gretzky says. "I had that same sense with Alex."

The timing felt right for Ovechkin to seek such counsel. Even after losing to the Kings in overtime the night before, he and the Capitals were cruising toward the league's best record; in less than three weeks they would clinch the Presidents' Trophy before any other Eastern Conference team secured a playoff berth. Ovechkin, meanwhile, remains the same dominant goal scorer. On Nov. 19 he overtook Sergei Fedorov atop the Russian-born career list. On Jan. 10 he became the fifth fastest to reach 500. On April 9 a hat trick in St. Louis gave him three straight 50-goal seasons, or three more than the rest of the NHL in that time. But these days his individual milestones only highlight what he still lacks.

"I have everything in my career besides a Stanley Cup and an Olympic gold medal," he says. "Nobody remembers who's second place. Everyone remembers the winner." Later, when asked what resonated most about his dinner with Ovechkin, Gretzky replied, "How much passion he has for the game and how badly he wants to win a Stanley Cup."

Fortunately for their captain, the Capitals, SI's pick to win the first championship in their 41-year history, have never been better equipped to help. "This is the year," Ovechkin firmly says. Goaltender Braden Holtby's 48 wins tied Martin Brodeur's single-season record. For the first time in six years, five other Capitals reached the 20-goal mark. Ovechkin himself topped the NHL in goals (50) for the fourth straight season, but 23-year-old center Evgeny Kuznetsov became the first teammate ever to best him in points (77 to Ovechkin's 71). "There's more balance," GM Brian MacLellan says. "It's not always Ovi, Ovi, Ovi."

Like each response Gretzky offered at dinner, these changes around Ovechkin only invite more curiosity. Will the Capitals' regular-season dominance continue in the 2016 Stanley Cup Playoffs? Can Ovechkin soothe the nerves of their nail-biting fans, who haven't enjoyed so much as a conference finals appearance this century? And what does it say about Ovechkin that on the back nine of his career, he would seek advice from Gretzky before taking his best crack yet at a title?

*"HE'S ASKING HOW TO GET TO **THE PROMISED LAND,"** TROTZ SAYS.*

About this last part, Capitals coach Barry Trotz has a theory. "He's asking how to get to the Promised Land, how can he be a better player," Trotz says. "When he was younger, that probably wouldn't be on his radar. As he's getting older, he realizes he doesn't have all those answers, so he's on a journey to find those answers.

"It's part of realizing you're a little bit mortal."

BOTH SIDES NOW
As always, Ovi is a dominant scorer, but he's now making plays on defense too.

LOOKING BACK on it almost two years later, Trotz's first meeting with his superstar forward bears a passing resemblance to the rendezvous of the Great Integers. Instead of seafood by the shore, though, Trotz and Ovechkin ate steak at a casino restaurant in Las Vegas.

It was June 2014. Ovechkin was attending the NHL's annual awards ceremony, where he would accept his fourth of five Maurice "Rocket" Richard Trophies as the league's leading goal scorer. That season the Capitals had missed the playoffs for the first time since '06–07, which led to the firing of GM George McPhee and coach Adam Oates. Pressure was mounting on Ovechkin, who as captain shouldered much of the criticism for yet another letdown (not to mention the Russian team's fifth-place finish on home soil in the '14 Sochi Olympics). Still, those disappointments were behind him; the bright sun and lively pool decks of Vegas gave Ovechkin a chance to relax.

Trotz, on the other hand, spent the previous month thinking about how he could make the most of this dinner. After leaving Nashville after 15 seasons, he had replaced Oates that May, and among his first congratulatory messages was one from Ovechkin, who called from the Kremlin after winning gold in the world championships. "Those were good signs," Trotz says. "That was a sign of leadership." Still, there was plenty more he hoped to learn.

Spanning four hours, Trotz says, his conversation with Ovechkin included "everything from what his ideal weight would be to how the team played, how he played, what he liked about the Caps, what he didn't like, to his family, the city, his goals and a little bit of old Russian history." But these were all appetizers compared to the main course Trotz served: a blunt critique of Ovechkin's game. Trotz shared what Nashville defensemen used to report about the Russian star: "As long as he's standing still, he's easy to cover, and he was doing a lot of standing."

Now, after two seasons together, it's clear that such directness connected Trotz and Ovechkin, who describe their relationship in equally bleepable terms. Says Ovechkin: "If I play s---, he have to give me s---. And he give s--- all the time. I'll take it."

And Trotz: "If he trusts you, you can be very direct. I think he likes that. Don't try to bulls--- him."

DOUG PENSINGER/GETTY IMAGES (BOARDS); GEOFF BURKE/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES (SHOT)

The results are noticeable. When Ovechkin skates at five-on-five, the Capitals allow only 39.27 unblocked shot attempts per 60 minutes, his lowest on-ice mark since 2009–10, when they won the Presidents' Trophy but fell in seven games to Montreal in the first round. Longtime Capitals assistant Blaine Forsythe sees Ovechkin disrupting more opposing breakouts by placing his stick into passing lanes and lingering longer in the defensive zone to ensure possession, rather than swooping wide to gain speed on the attack. "There's no real offensive cheat anymore," says Forsythe. "He makes more plays defensively than ever."

In Trotz, Ovechkin also found someone who shared his postseason pain. Trotz never reached the conference finals in Nashville, either, and he does not run from his professional mortality. "I'm probably on the backside of my career too," Trotz says. "The years start to go by and you're like, I haven't done this yet, I haven't done that yet." Looking at their pasts, it's easy to see how they complement each other, like puzzle pieces. Before Trotz, Ovechkin never had a bench boss with previous NHL experience; the coach, meanwhile, inherited the world-class goal scorer the Predators always lacked.

Which is why Trotz also conceded this to Ovechkin: "I can't teach you how to score goals and do the things you do." Basically, the coach said, Ovechkin should keep dazzling as he would against New Jersey in the 2015–16 season opener, when he toe-dragged between his legs, undressed defenseman John Moore and roofed the puck in close quarters. Keep dominating as he would for his 499th career goal, hoofing the full length of Madison Square Garden's rink in overtime while three Rangers watched haplessly. Keep the enthusiasm that made Ovechkin crash to his knees while trying to celebrate that game-winner, then face-plant in front of the Capitals' bench.

And certainly keep what Trotz calls his "in-the-moment spirit," a carpe diem attitude that was shaped two decades ago, when Ovechkin learned how quickly life could change.

TO BE HONEST, I don't remember what happened in '95, '96 and '97," Ovechkin says. "It was hard years. My memory is deleting." But the best and worst parts remain.

He remembers that his brother Sergei was big and strong, a businessman and former wrestler. He remembers

JOHN RUSSELL/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES

X-FACTOR

Center of Attention

To get past the second round, the Predators needed a top pivot man. Enter **Ryan Johansen**

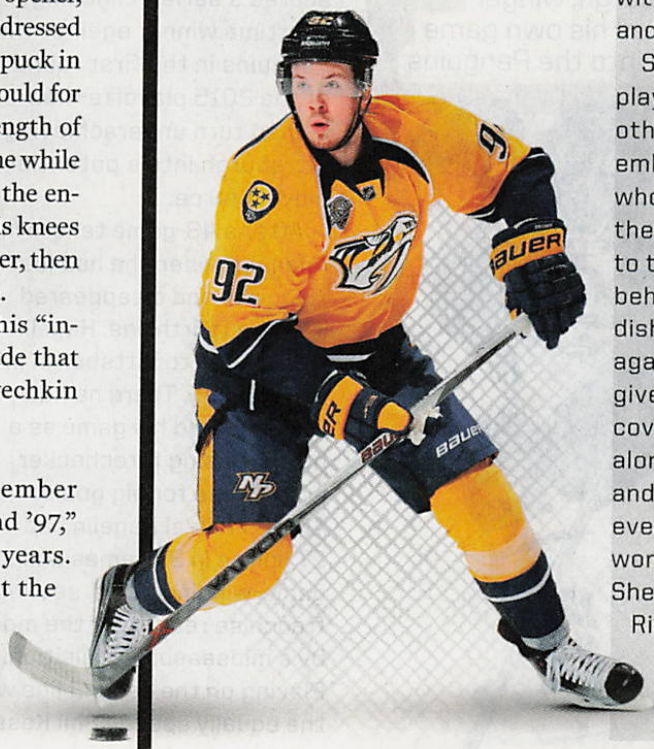
After 2003-04 the Predators made the playoffs eight times but never advanced past the second round. The problem was obvious and cyclical: Nashville was too good to tank for one of the top five picks that brought franchise forwards—especially centers—but offensively too weak to vie for a Stanley Cup.

That's not to say the Predators didn't try to work around their pivot problem. After losing to the Sharks in five games in 2006, Nashville signed 6' 5" Jason Arnott specifically to counteract San Jose's 6' 4" Jumbo Joe Thornton. That same season Nashville acquired Peter Forsberg before the trade deadline. Then the Predators lost, again in the first round, again to the Sharks and again in five games—a testament to their Sisyphean struggle for a franchise center.

After acquiring Ryan Johansen from Columbus for defenseman Seth Jones on Jan. 6, Nashville GM David Poile said, "In my belief we accomplished something that we haven't been able to do in our 18-year history, and that's to acquire a No. 1 center." Since changing teams, however, Johansen has been inconsistent. A season after breaking 70 points for the first time, he had eight goals and 26 assists in 42 Predators games, barely surpassing his disappointing first-half stat line with the Blue Jackets (six goals and 20 assists in 38 games).

Still, Johansen has made plays with the puck that no other Predator—save perhaps embattled Alexander Radulov, who left for the KHL in 2008, then again in '12—could hope to try (see: his behind-the-net, behind-the-back spin-o-rama dish to James Neal on Feb. 6 against the Sharks). Johansen gives Nashville the size it coveted (6' 3", 218 pounds) along with youthful energy and playmaking ability. To everyone who wistfully wondered what defenseman Shea Weber and goalie Pekka Rinne could do with a real offense in front of them: Now you will find out.

—Sam Page



that Sergei, 14 years older than Alex, scraped through tough economic times in Russia during the early 1990s. And he remembers that while their mother, Tatiana, played basketball and their father, Mikhail, played soccer, Sergei introduced Alex to the ice.

Alex also remembers the events surrounding his 10th birthday. That day, while Alex was at a hockey tournament, Sergei was in a car accident. Two days later a blood clot took his life. Alex remembers playing hockey the day after Sergei died. His parents hoped competition would distract him, but he remembers only crying on the bench. "You're still young," he says. "You say O.K., what's happening? He's passed away. O.K., whatever. But the next day, you realize you didn't hear his voice, you didn't see him. He's gone. Like, no more man."

Now six years older than Sergei was when he died, Alex still honors his late brother's memory on and off the ice. His gloves bear Cyrillic characters stitched into the thumbs—*Sergei* on the left, *Ovechkin* on the right. Alex never leaves Moscow without visiting his brother's grave. When he thinks about Sergei, he thinks, "Thanks for bringing me hockey."

For years Sergei's death was an off-limits topic for Alex both publicly and among family, the pain too raw. (Even now he demurs at first, saying, "Google it. All the answers are there.") But time has made him curious about certain details fuzzed in memory. He says he's asked Sergei's friends what he was like as an adult. "They say, 'We never see a guy with the same energy. He's always straightforward. That's what [we] like about him.' "

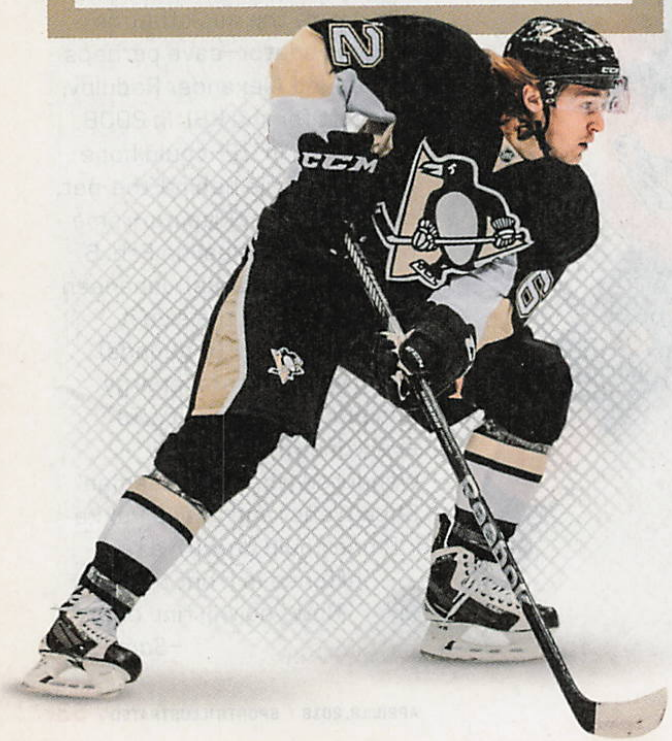
Energy and *straightforward*; the resemblance is easy to see. After all, what is Ovechkin if not electrifying? While his goal-scoring strikes fear in opponents, his celebrations sometimes scare even his teammates. "He's crushed me a couple of times," center Nicklas Backstrom says. During his rookie season Ovechkin dressed as Santa for the staff holiday party and handed out presents; this winter he donned a pink bunny suit for a team video. "He's that way when most of the stars in the league are these conservative, don't-want-to-rock-the-boat kind of kids," says McPhee. Caps owner Ted Leonsis fondly calls Ovechkin "a unicorn."

Lately, though, those around Ovechkin see more *straightforward* in his vigor. "Back before, he was goofy all the time," says Backstrom, his longtime pivot. "Now he's matured a little bit." Coaches say Ovechkin is more engaged during

X-FACTOR

Born Again

Since arriving in Pittsburgh, winger **Carl Hagelin** has revived his own game and breathed new life into the Penguins



Last year Carl Hagelin ended Pittsburgh's season; this year he might well save it. The fleet-footed winger—who as a Ranger scored a series-clinching overtime winner against the Penguins in the first round of the 2015 playoffs—has helped turn underachieving Pittsburgh into a potential playoff force.

After a 43-game tenure in Anaheim, where he had just 12 points and disappeared into the fourth line, Hagelin was traded to Pittsburgh in mid-January. There he has rediscovered his game as a havoc-raising forechecker with a nose for big goals. After the deal Hagelin had 27 points in 37 games and six game-winning goals, setting a franchise record for the most by a midseason acquisition. Playing on the second line with the equally speedy Phil Kessel, who not accidentally exploded for 34 points after Jan. 17, Hagelin has seen a 15.1% jump in offensive-zone starts, which has had a direct effect on his possession stats (Pittsburgh owns a 57.3% advantage in shot attempts when Hagelin is on the ice), which have never been higher.

Moreover, Hagelin's extensive postseason experience as a clutch scorer and penalty killer—73 games over the last four years—is an asset for a team that has not won a game beyond the second round since 2009. Most important for the Penguins, who have scored just one goal in seven of their last eight playoff games, Hagelin holds the promise of secondary scoring, either by netting goals himself or by acting as a spark plug for the dangerous Kessel.

—Jeremy Fuchs

JUSTIN BERL/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP

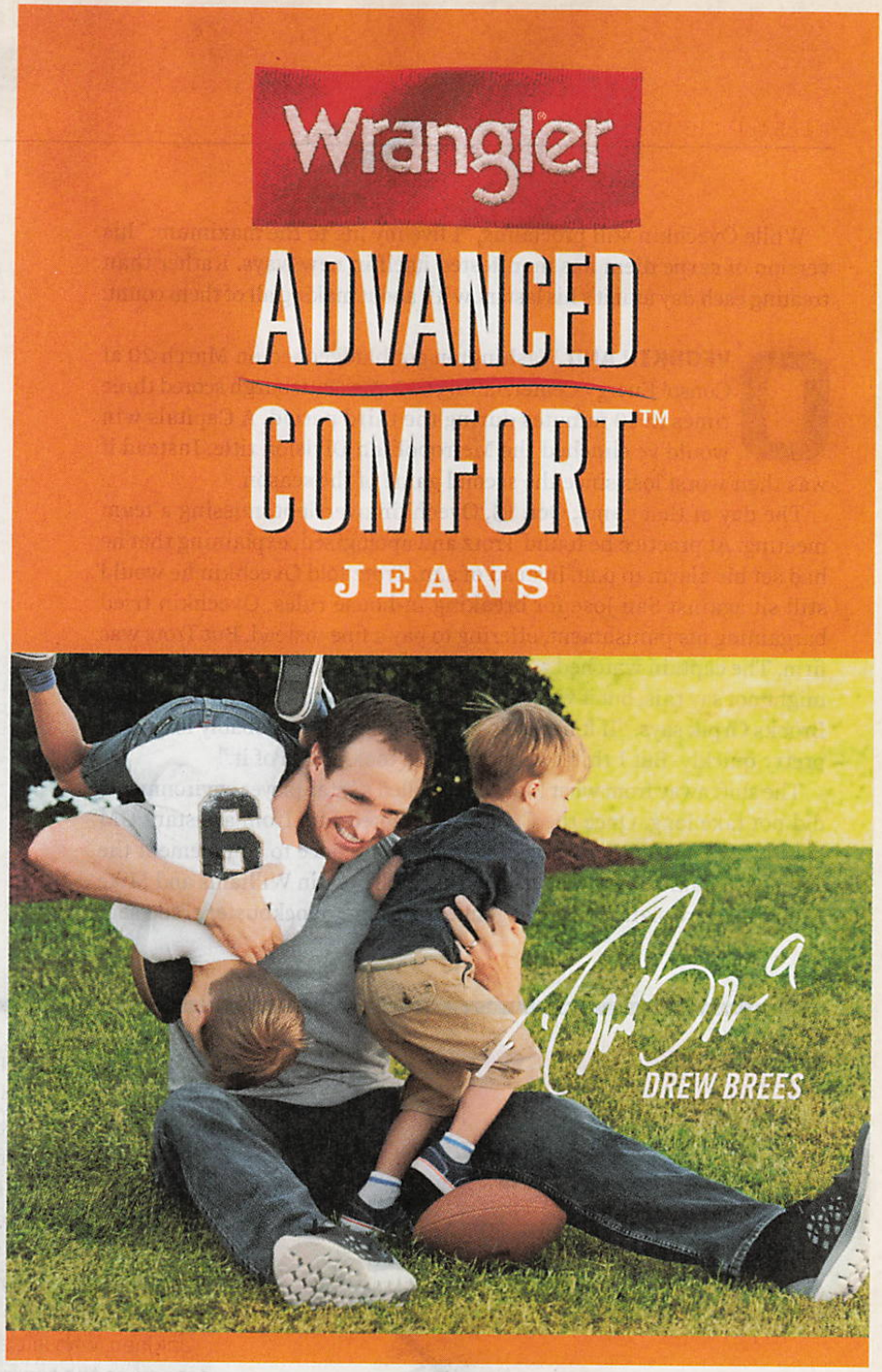
team meetings, asking questions and offering suggestions. "He can sit still for more than five minutes," Forsythe says. Tatiana says he is preparing to defend his graduate-school dissertation in physical education. Earlier this season it was a big win for the team's training staff when Ovechkin started drinking a fruit smoothie spiked with ginger, turmeric and Brazil nuts, which provided nutrients that blood tests showed his diet lacked.

Though order sheets in Bauer's factories still require that Ovechkin's sticks reach higher quality-control levels than those of any other client, his local rep observes that Ovechkin has toughened his personal standards too. "Probably when he was younger he wasn't as high maintenance, but now he's at his peak," Tim Parr says.

To Ovechkin, these are all evolutions that come naturally with age. "You can't be 25 all the time," he says. "Time to move forward and make a future." His mother taught him that an athlete reaches peak mental performance around 30, which was when she won her second of two Olympic gold medals with Russia's basketball team. "You already have the skill and the experience, your movement becomes the sharpest," Tatiana says through an interpreter. "This is the time when a player should play his best game."

Tatiana, a former coach and current executive of Dynamo Moscow's women's squad, also sees a narrowing focus in her youngest son. "You have to be the No. 1 in everything," she often told Alex. "Otherwise there's no reason to just follow someone and be a tail. You have to be the No. 1." And now? "His motivation is to be the No. 1, and he is growing."

But Tatiana also taught Alex that windows close. "I'm still young," he says, "but if your body can't handle the pressure—the work, the game—it's time to let it go and do something else. I know I can play my contract [which expires in 2020] easily. But I'm talking in the future, when you're 35 or 36. Depends on how I'm going to feel, how my family going to feel. I don't want to be in a position like, O.K., just give me a contract and I'll be on the team and play every two games. I don't want to be like that."



While Ovechkin still proclaims, "I live my life to the maximum," his version of carpe diem has manifested itself in new ways. Rather than treating each day as if it's his last, now it's about making all of them count.

OVECHKIN AND Washington got bludgeoned on March 20 at Consol Energy Center, falling 6–2 after Pittsburgh scored three times in 10 minutes during the third period. A Capitals win would've clinched the Metropolitan Division title. Instead it was their worst loss since the second game of the season.

The day of that game, Oct. 13, Ovechkin overslept, missing a team meeting. At practice he found Trotz and apologized, explaining that he had set his alarm to p.m. instead of a.m. Trotz told Ovechkin he would still sit against San Jose for breaking in-house rules. Ovechkin tried bargaining his punishment, offering to pay a fine instead. But Trotz was firm. The captain watched as the Sharks waxed Washington, 5–0. "Ovi might not say this, but it was probably good for everybody," defenseman Brooks Orpik says. "If it happens to another guy, it's probably forgotten pretty quickly. But I think a lot of people took notice of it."

The shift away from what MacLellan called a "star-player environment" did not take long. Once the Capitals promoted him from assistant GM last May, MacLellan prioritized veteran experience to complement the core. Past Stanley Cup winners such as Orpik, Justin Williams and Mike Richards were signed as free agents. A summer blockbuster trade sent Troy Brouwer to St. Louis, but the return stabilized Ovechkin and Backstrom's right wing: T.J. Oshie's 26 goals are the most by any Capital not named Ovechkin since Alexander Semin's 28 in 2010–11. "We need to get over the hump organizationally," MacLellan says. "These guys have been through it."

Implicit in these moves is what Ovechkin readily admits: As superhuman as he seems, nothing lasts forever. "Maybe this is going to be my last year," he says. "Maybe if we miss, next year I'm going to be traded to some team that's going to rebuild. I don't want to be in this position. I want to win it."

More than anyone else, Ovechkin has tired of his Great Wait. "It's about time he wins that," Tatiana says of the Cup. All around him, the puzzle pieces appear locked into place: a trusted coach, a supportive cast, a singular focus. Will it make a difference? This much is certain: Ovechkin will attack his greatest mission—and the next stage of his career—with straightforward energy. □

X-FACTOR

New Story

Once just a shootout specialist, **Jussi Jokinen** reinvented himself as the Panthers' most adaptable player

If this year's Panthers exemplify reinvention, no player has rewritten his old narrative more thoroughly than Jussi Jokinen. No longer just a shootout specialist, the 33-year-old winger has been the most versatile member of Florida's roster.

Jokinen, who is tied for second on the team in scoring, has 18 goals, more than twice his output last season, and leads the Panthers with 42 assists. Florida takes 53.4% of shot attempts when he is on the ice, the highest such mark on the team, although he starts more than half of his shifts in the defensive zone. Jokinen's 2.4 points per 60 minutes puts him ahead of stars Phil Kessel of Pittsburgh and Zach Parise of Minnesota, and he was a career-high +25 this season, higher than his legendary teammate, Jaromir Jagr.

Beyond the stats, Jokinen has been an asset for his adaptability. One of two Panthers forwards to log more than two minutes per game on both the power play and the penalty kill, he can also slip seamlessly onto any of Florida's top three lines—an invaluable quality when injuries inevitably occur in the playoffs.

Speaking of which, Jokinen is one of the few Panthers with considerable postseason experience. In 48 career playoff games (with three teams), he has amassed 28 points and scored 16 goals, including three game-winners in 2014 for the Penguins. While there aren't any shootouts in playoff hockey, Jokinen has proved that now he can contribute in other ways. —J.F.

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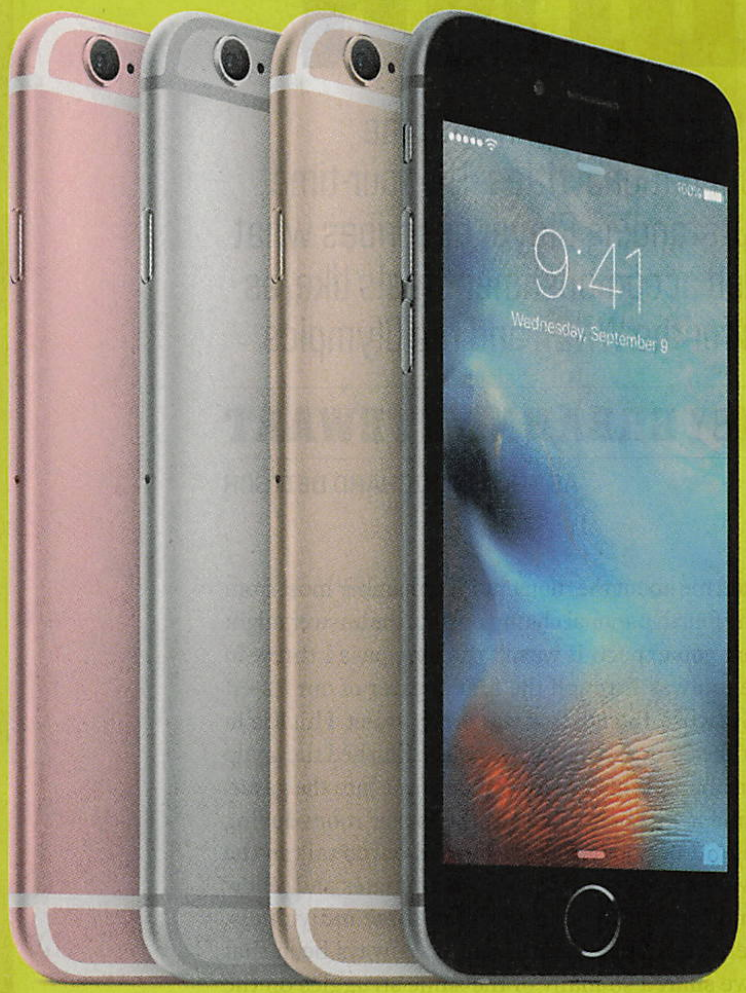

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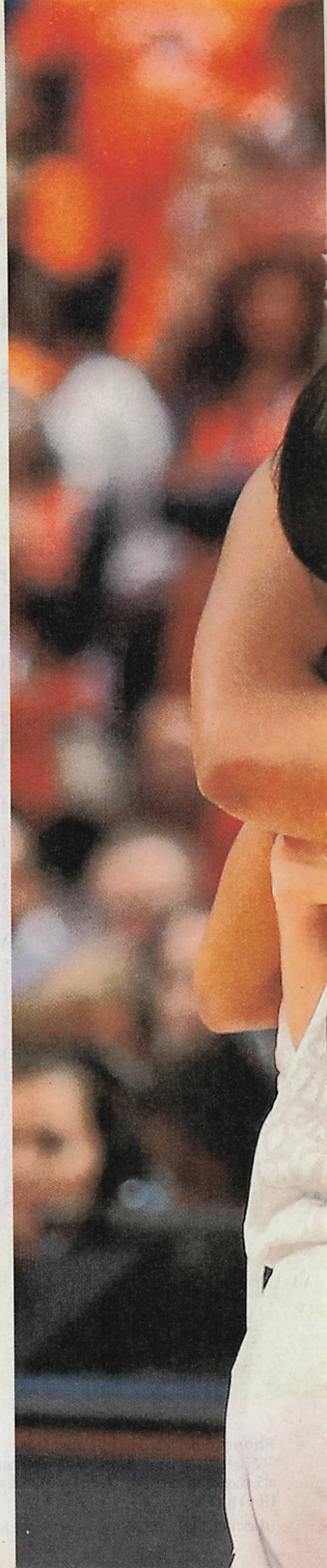
Only at Walmart

PERFECT ENDING

Breanna Stewart came to UConn with the goal of winning four national titles. The four-time Final Four Most Outstanding Player describes what that unprecedented accomplishment feels like, as well as her hopes for the WNBA and the Olympics

/// BY **BREANNA STEWART**

AS TOLD TO RICHARD DEITSCH



IF YOU asked me about the moment I'll remember most from winning my fourth national championship, the answer might not be what you expect. It wasn't the long pass I threw to Kia Nurse midway through the first quarter of our 82–51 win over Syracuse, though that was pretty sweet. I hit Kia in stride over the Orange defenders, and she finished the layup without dribbling, which really got our fans into the game.

No, for me it was being back in the locker room during the cooling-off period before we headed out to talk to the media. I was sitting across from my teammates and fellow seniors, Morgan Tuck and Moriah Jefferson. We are three individuals, but when we are together, we act like one person. It's always been that way among us because we shared so many of the same struggles on the way to success.

No words were spoken. We started laughing, but then something like a deep breath came over us. Each of us knew what the other two were thinking:

We did it. We did exactly what we wanted to do.

I had the perfect ending to a college career. My goal coming in as a freshman at UConn was to win four national championships, and I made that known to Coach [Geno] Auriemma. Then I put it out there when people asked me about it—if you ask me a question, I will answer you honestly. I don't think this could have happened with any other group at any other

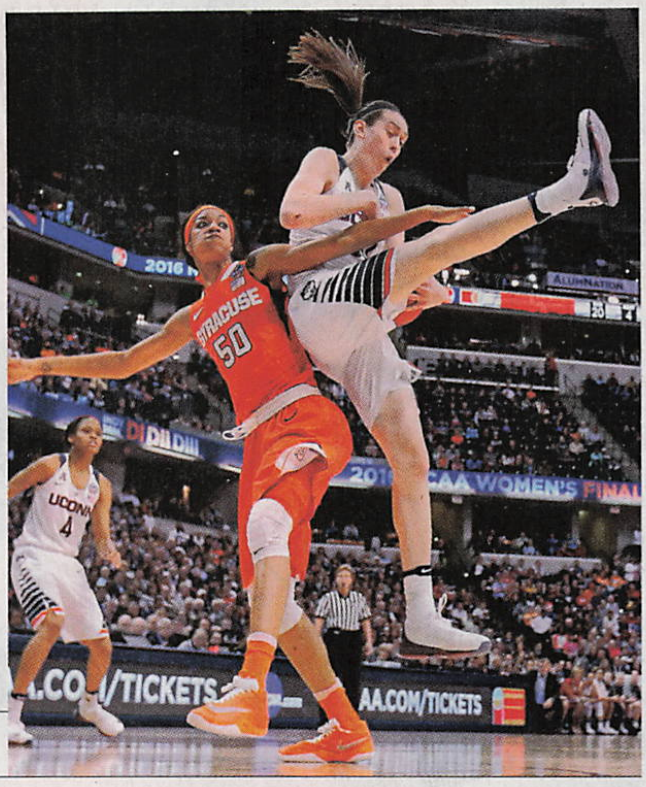
THREE FOR FOUR
The senior trio of (clockwise from near left) Stewart, Jefferson and Tuck went 151-5 at Connecticut, the most successful four-year span in women's basketball history.

Photograph by **Larry Radloff**
Icon Sportswire/AP

school, and I credit a lot of that to Coach Auriemma and our other coaches. They pushed us to levels that we didn't know we could reach.

As I write this two days after the game, I have not been in the same place for 12 straight hours since we left the floor [of Bankers Life Fieldhouse] in Indianapolis. I haven't had much of a chance to process things. It doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel like my college career is over. I'm not one to keep a lot of souvenirs from the Final Fours, but I do keep the part of the net I've cut down from each of the national championships, as well as the hats we've gotten after each title. I've tied my pieces of the net to each hat.

After the title game we didn't get back to the team hotel until about one in the morning. There was a huge celebration in the lobby with our families, friends and fans of the team. I had about 50 members of my family at the game.



BY THE NUMBERS /// NCAA TOURNAMENT

2013
26.0
Points averaged by Stewart in the Final Four against Louisville and Notre Dame, up from 12.2 in the regular season.

2014
8
Points scored (out of UConn's first 14) in the title-game victory over Notre Dame. She finished with 21 and nine boards.

2015
3
Most Outstanding Player awards, tying Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for most ever. Stewart added a fourth in '16.

2016
446
Points scored in the NCAA tournament, third all-time. She also ranks third in rebounds (207) and second in blocks (71).

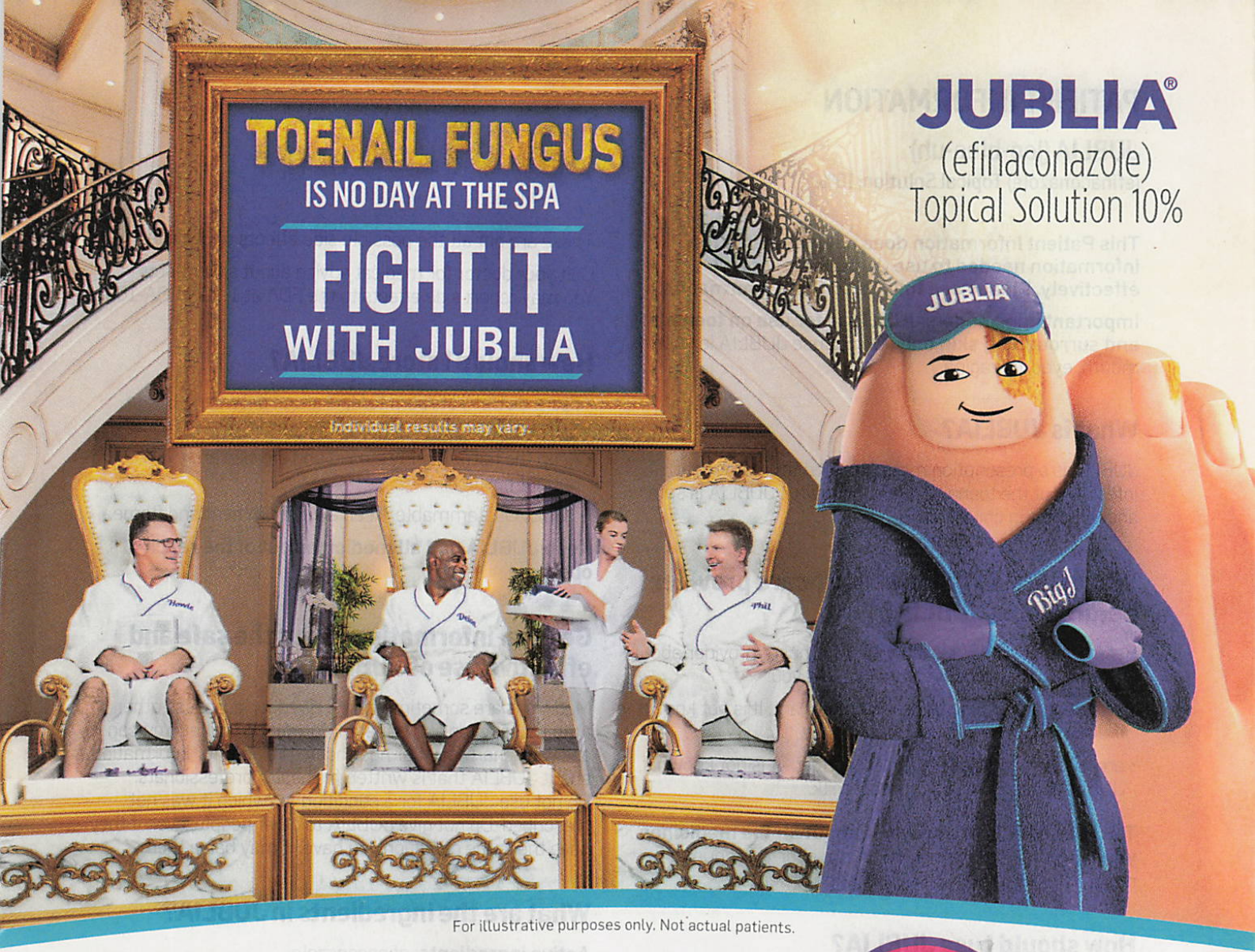
My grandmother Jeanniene Baldwin organized two box suites for everybody who came. In the lobby I shared a big hug with my parents because they have been on this journey with me. After the team met with family and friends, we went back to my room and hung out with the practice players and team managers. We spent the night reminiscing about the season, the final game, and listened to a lot of Rihanna. I finally got to sleep at around 5:15 a.m. I woke up about five hours later, and I remember lying in my bed thinking, *Wow, did this really just happen?*

WE LANDED at Bradley Airport in Hartford around 4 p.m. that day, and it's about a 40-minute drive to our campus in Storrs. We had a police escort all the way, and there were cars lined up on the side of the road, with people waving to us all along I-84. It was pretty amazing. We usually have a parade after we win, but because the weather was bad, we had a rally at Gampel Pavilion instead. But I was out of there quick. I had to fly to Los Angeles at 8 a.m. on Thursday morning for the Wooden Awards. [Stewart won as the nation's top female player for the second straight time.]

It's surreal to think that the WNBA draft is this week. WNBA training camp starts on April 24, and I'll be finishing my degree in sport in society at UConn before I go to my new team. At this point I know a lot more about the Seattle Storm [who have the No. 1 pick] than I did at the beginning of the year. When the WNBA lottery came out, I started paying really close attention to the league. Everything is happening so fast, but it's also very exciting. I have similar championship aspirations for the WNBA, even if I haven't made them public. I am the type of person who likes to set both individual and team goals. It's going to be a completely different team and organization than UConn was, but at the same time, I still want to have success and do what I can to help. I think because of all the national team experience I have, playing and practicing against the best players in the world, I'll feel really comfortable going to the next level.

Something I know I can bring to my new team is positive energy. When I went to the Honda Awards in L.A. last summer, I bought a book called *The Energy Bus* by Jon Gordon. Once I started reading it, it shifted my outlook on things. In the story there's a guy having a terrible day. His car has a flat

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES



JUBLIA®
(efinaconazole)
Topical Solution 10%

For illustrative purposes only. Not actual patients.

JUBLIA is an FDA-approved prescription topical solution used to treat toenail fungus (onychomycosis)

JUBLIA is specifically formulated to reach the site of onychomycosis and fight the fungus that can live beneath the toenail—allowing some patients to have clearer toenails grow back. Don't hide toenail fungus. Fight it with JUBLIA.

Ask your doctor if JUBLIA is right for you and visit JubliaRx.com

Indication

JUBLIA (efinaconazole) Topical Solution, 10% is a prescription medicine used to treat fungal infections of the toenails.

Important Safety Information

- JUBLIA is for use on nails and surrounding skin only. Do not use JUBLIA in your mouth, eyes, or vagina. Use it exactly as instructed by your doctor.
- It is not known whether JUBLIA is effective in children.
- Before you use JUBLIA, tell your doctor about all your medical conditions, including if you are or plan to become pregnant, are breastfeeding, or plan to breastfeed, because it is not known whether JUBLIA can harm an unborn fetus or nursing infant.
- Tell your doctor about all medications you are taking, and whether you have any other nail infections.
- JUBLIA is flammable. Avoid heat and flame while applying JUBLIA to your toenail.
- JUBLIA may cause irritation at the treated site. The most common side effects include: ingrown toenail, redness, itching, swelling, burning or stinging, blisters, and pain. Tell your doctor about any side effects that bother you or do not go away.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit www.fda.gov/medwatch or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

Please see Patient Information for JUBLIA on next page.

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PATIENT INFORMATION

JUBLIA (joo-blee-uh)
(efinaconazole) Topical Solution, 10%

This Patient Information does not include all the information needed to use JUBLIA safely and effectively. Please see full Prescribing Information.

Important information: JUBLIA is for use on toenails and surrounding skin only. Do not use JUBLIA in your mouth, eyes, or vagina.

What is JUBLIA?

JUBLIA is a prescription medicine used to treat fungal infections of the toenails. It is not known if JUBLIA is safe and effective in children.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before using JUBLIA?

Before you use JUBLIA, tell your healthcare provider about all your medical conditions, including if you:

- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if JUBLIA can harm your unborn baby.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if JUBLIA passes into your breast milk.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

How should I use JUBLIA?

See the "Instructions for Use" at the end of this Patient Information leaflet for detailed information about the right way to use JUBLIA.

- Use JUBLIA exactly as your healthcare provider tells you to use it. Apply JUBLIA to your affected toenails 1 time each day. Wait for at least 10 minutes after showering, bathing, or washing before applying JUBLIA. JUBLIA is used for 48 weeks.
- It is not known if the use of nail polish or other cosmetic nail products (such as gel nails or acrylic nails) will affect how JUBLIA works.

What should I avoid while using JUBLIA?

- JUBLIA is flammable. Avoid heat and flame while applying JUBLIA to your toenail.

What are the possible side effects of JUBLIA?

JUBLIA may cause irritation at the treated site. The most common side effects include: ingrown toenail, redness, itching, swelling, burning or stinging, blisters, and pain. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effects that bother you or that does not go away.

These are not all the possible side effects of JUBLIA.

Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to the FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

How should I store JUBLIA?

- Store JUBLIA at room temperature, between 68°F to 77°F (20°C to 25°C). Do not freeze JUBLIA.
- Keep the bottle tightly closed and store in an upright position.
- JUBLIA is flammable. Keep away from heat and flame.

Keep JUBLIA and all medicines out of the reach of children.

General information about the safe and effective use of JUBLIA

Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than those listed in a Patient Information leaflet. You can ask your pharmacist or healthcare provider for information about JUBLIA that is written for health professionals. Do not use JUBLIA for a condition for which it was not prescribed. Do not give JUBLIA to other people, even if they have the same condition you have. It may harm them.

What are the ingredients in JUBLIA?

Active ingredients: efinaconazole

Inactive ingredients: alcohol, anhydrous citric acid, butylated hydroxytoluene, C12-15 alkyl lactate, cyclomethicone, diisopropyl adipate, disodium edetate, and purified water.

Manufactured for: Valeant Pharmaceuticals North America LLC, Bridgewater, NJ 08807 USA

Manufactured by: Kaken Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd, Shizuoka, Japan. Product of Japan

For more information, call 1-800-321-4576.

This Patient Information has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

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Issued: 02/2015 9391902

ORANGE, CRUSHED
Syracuse defenders couldn't stop Stewart, who had game highs of 24 points and 10 rebounds in the 82–51 title-game win.

MICHAEL CONROY/AP

tire—the least of his problems—so he has to take a bus. He gets on, and the driver refers to her bus as the Energy Bus. The book talks a lot about how you portray yourself and how that rubs off on the people around you. It teaches you about how you want people to see and react to you. It was an interesting book, and though it wasn't written about sports, it made me think more deeply about how to create positive energy and have that rub off on my teammates. It's a book used by a lot of coaches, including [the Clippers'] Doc Rivers and [Clemson football coach] Dabo Swinney.

One of my major goals is to play in the Olympics. I'll be honest: If I don't make the team for Rio, it would suck. But I know this year is one of the most competitive years we've ever had for a U.S. women's Olympic basketball team. I realize I'd go from playing a lot of minutes to getting not so many, but that's what happens when you're with so many great players. I can learn so much just from watching and practicing.

"The fact that some people put me in the same class with Cheryl Miller, Diana Taurasi and Maya Moore IS CRAZY TO ME."

I'VE BEEN asked often to define my legacy at UConn, but it's hard for me to do. The fact that some people put me in the same class with Cheryl Miller, Diana Taurasi and Maya Moore is crazy to me. Watching players like that growing up and then hearing people call you the GOAT, I mean, I feel in awe because I don't know how many compliments are better than that. But it's an impossible question. Who would I choose as the greatest women's college player ever? I feel like it's too hard to decide.

People have told me that my game reminds them of [Chicago Sky forward] Elena Delle Donne and [L.A. Sparks forward] Candace Parker because of their versatility. All of us are able to play inside-outside. I can definitely see the similarities to Elena given that both of us are comfortable with our backs to the basket or on the perimeter. She is a great shooter, and I want to continue to get better and hopefully become that great a shooter. One of the things I talked to Coach Auriemma about is that Elena's shot is the same every time. She swishes almost every shot, and having that kind of release, where the ball is going up and not out, is something I'd like to have. I admire her demeanor on the court. She doesn't get rushed with any defense and gets the shot she wants.

Through all the championships and the awards, I have tried to remain a down-to-earth person. I know within me there is a confident and maybe even cocky person, but that doesn't need to define how I interact with people. I think this comes from my parents. My mom [Heather] works at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse in the human resources department. My dad [Brian] works there too. He's an MRI technician. They taught me to be humble and also made me recognize the good times will not always last, so you should take things in and enjoy it.

Away from basketball I like to shop for shoes. I probably own hundreds. There's a pair that I just got, and I love them so much that I don't know if I will ever wear them. I also like to go to the movies, and I like to bake. I've gotten pretty good at making chocolate chip cookies and snickerdoodles, but I'm not quite ready to take orders.

People think UConn has it easy, but I don't believe they know how hard we've worked to be successful. My freshman year at times was terrible, and I had to learn how to get out of funks. The lowest point in my college career came as a freshman after a 76–70 loss to Baylor [in February 2013]. I struggled leading up to the game, and it's the only game in my entire college career where I did not score. I played seven minutes and missed the only two shots I took. Knowing that I did not help my teammates in a game we could have won if I had showed up really hurt me. But I wasn't prepared and I got exploited. I had to get better and I did.

I think next year's UConn team is going to take it as a collective challenge when they hear—and they will hear it—that the Huskies won't be as good or dominant without Moriah and Morgan and me. But they know how to win, so it's about people stepping up and taking bigger roles and following in the path that was created for us. It obviously won't be easy, but nothing is easy. □

WITH A BAN

SI EXCLUSIVE

THE GIANTS' JASON PIERRE-PAUL RELIVES THE FIREWORKS ACCIDENT THAT DESTROYED HIS HAND—AND COST HIM MILLIONS

BY JASON BUCKLAND

Photograph by
Brad Penner
USA Today Sports

IN THE late hours of July 4, 2015, at a holiday cookout in his hometown of Deerfield Beach, Fla., Giants defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul stood on a patch of sun-beaten grass, across the street from a party where more than 50 family members and friends milled about in the nearly 90° heat. Nearby, parked on the shoulder, sat a U-Haul van. Inside, a civic contribution of sorts: He had purchased $1,100 worth of fireworks, enough for the whole neighborhood to enjoy.

Just before midnight, after an evening of shooting fireworks into the sky, JPP decided he'd had enough. But then a friend pointed out that the U-Haul was almost empty. Shouldn't they pop off the last few?

With his shirt off, Pierre-Paul obliged—or at least tried to. He attempted seven times to apply flame to fuse, to ignite a stick that would send a stream of colors rocketing into the night, but the wind kept blowing out his lighter. He remembers thinking, *Let me try one more time. . . .*

Suddenly, success—and then an eruption, a bang and a blinding green-and-white light that, witnesses say, swallowed Pierre-Paul's 6' 5", 278-pound frame. "I remember a big flash, and I heard *boom!*" says Farraw Germain, the mother of Pierre-Paul's then eight-month-old son, Josiah. "There was a lot of smoke." Pierre-Paul sensed trouble right away. "As soon as I saw the green light, I jumped," he says. "I knew something dangerous was about to happen."

Pierre-Paul dropped to the grass. But when he arose he smelled nothing, felt nothing. Then he heard Germain shriek in terror, "Your hand!"

He glanced down. The street had gone black again, but Pierre-Paul could make out a sight far more gruesome and shocking than anything he'd ever glimpsed on a football field. "I'm looking at my [right] hand and I'm seeing every ligament," he recalls. "You only see this stuff in the movies."

In an instant he wrapped his shirt around his hand—destroyed to a degree he still could not know—and bounded toward the passenger seat of Germain's nearby Porsche Cayenne. Inside, blood

G
NFL
ATM
90

spilled everywhere, on the doors, on the seat, in the dashboard vents. The metallic smell of gore filled the car.

A friend named Tarvarus Jackson drove, weaving south on I-95 and blowing through whatever traffic lights impeded him, the 15-minute ride to Broward Health North hospital in Deerfield Beach taking just five. At his side, Pierre-Paul's mind raced: *Would he lose his career? His hand? He was hemorrhaging a lot of blood; would Josiah lose his father?*

Damn, Pierre-Paul remembers telling himself as the hospital came into view. *I messed up.*

EVEN IN the morning, the South Florida sun sizzles during early spring, but Jason Pierre-Paul doesn't seem to notice. He grows animated in telling his story in detail for the first time to a reporter; his voice rises, and he throws his body to the ground as he reenacts his nightmare.

Pierre-Paul has returned to the place where his world forever changed, a small piece of yellowed lawn on NW 2nd Avenue, 40 miles north of downtown Miami. It has been nine months since his accident, and to him it feels an eternity away. The experience, he says, has given him a fresh view on football and life. At 27, he can hardly compare the person he was before he lit that fuse with the one he has become.

Pierre-Paul was raised in Deerfield Beach without much, the son of Haitian immigrants. His father, Jean, went blind from glaucoma and could not support his growing family; his mother, Marie, had to go to work just after Jason was born. She learned to drive, became a housekeeper and has remained one since, even as her third child's NFL fortunes grew.

So it was that when Pierre-Paul came into a little money, he shared it. Every Independence Day since he was 15, he'd light fireworks across the street from the home of his best friend, Ezekiel Muse. As Pierre-Paul grew older and richer, the fireworks displays grew larger and more grand. They were, Pierre-Paul says, a way to give the children of his old neighborhood the excitement he longed for growing up.

How quickly a joyful occasion turned perilous. Several times in the rush to the hospital, he unwrapped the shirt to peek at his hand, which looked as if a flap had been peeled back to expose all that hid beneath his thumb, index finger, middle finger and palm. "You see all your ligaments, your tendons, everything," he says. "I saw how the hand really is without skin on it."

Then, as Pierre-Paul arrived at Broward Health North . . . *nothing*. Here is the beginning of a manic period of anesthesia, emergency surgeries and pain meds so strong that Pierre-Paul says he can't recall much of what happened next. He has had to piece together the following days from the accounts of those who were with him, a waiting room full of concerned friends, family and advisers, including his agent, Eugene Parker (who died last month), and his business manager, Danny Martoe. But Pierre-Paul remembers this: Before he succumbed to a state of semiconsciousness, he had one directive for his doctors. "Whatever y'all do, *do not* cut my hand off."

Pierre-Paul was rushed into surgery, where more than a dozen pins were inserted to stabilize his injury, which included a broken thumb, an index finger that would most likely require amputation, a middle finger that would never be the same and a charred palm in need of multiple skin grafts. "Jason was in excruciating pain," says Germain. "He could barely talk; he kept moaning. He was crying, 'Oh, my gosh. What did I do?' " Despite the violence of the explosion, all of his fingers were still technically attached to his hand—his index and middle finger by the bone, his thumb, Pierre-Paul says, by only the skin. One doctor told Germain in those first hectic hours that Pierre-Paul's NFL career was almost certainly done.

JPP's advisers scrambled. Because of the holiday, most of South Florida's best hand surgeons were

SLIP SERVICE

One year after racking up 12½ sacks, Pierre-Paul couldn't get a grip on QBs like Newton. The difference? It starts and ends with his hand.

FROM TOP: JEFF SINER/TNS/ZUMAPRESS.COM; JULIO CORTEZ/AP

unavailable, and with a multimillion-dollar career at stake, his camp needed them back. After one night at Broward Health, Pierre-Paul was transferred by ambulance to Jackson Memorial Hospital, in Miami, where he entered the care of a team led by Patrick Owens, an orthopedic surgeon with a history of treating professional athletes. Here, for the first time, Pierre-Paul's reps say they were assured that both his hand and his career might be salvaged.

Lying in his hospital bed, knocked out by the pain meds, Pierre-Paul was oblivious to this semi-promising news. As were the Giants, whose representatives would quickly come calling.

ON JULY 6, within 48 hours of learning through social media about their best defensive player's horrific accident, the Giants' senior vice president of medical services, Ronnie Barnes, and team special assistant Jessie Armstead, a mentor to Pierre-Paul, flew to Miami, intent on learning the extent of Pierre-Paul's injuries.

For both parties it was a precarious moment. New York had placed its franchise tag on Pierre-Paul four months earlier and then offered a reported $60 million extension, but at the time of the accident he still had not signed the extension. (His signature was not due until July 15; if he declined, he still would be guaranteed $14.8 million in 2015.) Even with all the uncertainty after the accident, the Giants did not immediately retract their franchise tender to Pierre-Paul, who would have become an unrestricted free agent had they done so.

At Jackson Memorial, Barnes and Armstead had to negotiate access to their player through his family and advisers. Eventually, Germain says she spoke on his behalf: She met with the Giants' reps at a hospital Dunkin' Donuts and told them he wasn't ready to be seen, that he could barely communicate; often he would just moan answers to doctors' questions, then slip back to sleep. On July 8 the New York contingent left Miami with little new information.

The drama ballooned from there. Pro Football Talk reported that Pierre-Paul had knowingly denied the Giants entrance to his room. (JPP rejects that: "If I knew they were there, I'd be like, Let 'em in.") And a team source told the New York *Daily News,* "We really don't understand why [his representatives] won't let us help him. What are they trying to do?" (Giants spokesperson Pat Hanlon confirms Pierre-Paul's account.)

Depending on which story you read, the injury was either very serious or not serious at all; Pierre-Paul's career was finished or he was ready to play again. The closest thing to a real answer came when ESPN's Adam Schefter tweeted a photo of Pierre-Paul's medical chart that showed that his right index finger had been amputated. (Pierre-Paul later filed a lawsuit against ESPN and Schefter, seeking damages for the publication of private medical information; no hearing has been set.)

From afar it all seemed like smoke and mirrors, Pierre-Paul obfuscating the extent of his injuries in order to hold on to some leverage in contract talks. But he swears he was so doped up during the days following his accident that he only later learned, on TV, about the Giants' visit. "People say he was hiding, dodging," says Germain. "It's not like Jason was enjoying hospital food, lounging." When asked whether he could have been more forthcoming about the extent of his injury, Pierre-Paul stands firm: The decision his inner circle made on his behalf was the right one. "My family is gonna go off what they think is best for [us]," he says.

SI.COM

To learn more about Pierre-Paul's career-threatening injury, head online and watch as he visits the site of his accident at **SI.com/NFL**

Pierre-Paul stayed in the hospital for 2½ weeks, uninterrupted. On July 14 he watched from his room as news reports said he'd been sent home. And in one way it was true that Jason Pierre-Paul was no longer a patient at Jackson Memorial: That's because for much of his stay, to avoid media attention, JPP says he was checked in under a fake name that his medical staff conjured up: Don X.

Two-and-a-half weeks is a tough amount of time for any person to spend in a hospital, especially a finely tuned athletic freak like Pierre-Paul. Ultimately, he endured so many hand operations—eight in the hospital, two later—that he began to waste away in his bed. He tried his best to stay in shape, yanking out his IV and enlisting a nurse to climb flights of stairs alongside him, but there was only so much he could do. By the time he was released, on July 22, he had shed 30 pounds.

SEVEN WEEKS later, on Sept. 7, Pierre-Paul flew commercial from Fort Lauderdale to Newark for his first meeting with the Giants since the accident. There he says he was welcomed by a supportive room—owner John Mara, general manager Jerry Reese and coach Tom Coughlin—eager to see him return to health. It was

MATT STAKER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

JASON PIERRE-PAUL

WELCOME TO THE CLUB

Hope for Giants fans: Even one-handed, JPP wreaked havoc; Pro Football Focus ranked him the 13th-best pass rusher in 2015.

a short, informal catch-up, but Pierre-Paul says he was buoyed by the visit. He believed he was ready to return to the field.

Team doctors thought otherwise. New York held off signing Pierre-Paul until Oct. 27, at which point the desperate Giants—31st in the NFL with just eight sacks at that point—finally presented an incentive-laden offer for the remainder of the season: $1.5 million guaranteed, with a chance to earn $7.2 million more. Even if he achieved a series of ambitious incentives, Pierre-Paul would make, at best, half his original franchise-tag money.

In the meantime he worked with trainer Mike Alessi at the IMPACT Sports Performance gym in Boca Raton, pushing sleds with his bandaged hand, pounding whatever weights he could, working the dexterity in his hand and rebuilding the atrophied muscles in his arm.

In Week 9, after only three days of practice and wearing a monstrous padded club over his right hand, he debuted against the Buccaneers and made two tackles. He returned at 265 pounds, having regained nearly two-thirds of the weight he lost in the hospital, but too often he found that he wasn't himself on the field. In Week 15, Pierre-Paul chased down Cam Newton, certain that he could strip the Panthers' QB—but his reach was clumsy and his clubbed right hand jabbed Newton in the shoulder instead.

The Giants went 2–6 with Pierre-Paul on the field and failed to make the playoffs. One year after he'd racked up 12½ sacks, helping the team rank fourth in the NFL with 47, Pierre-Paul had just one, and New York finished 30th with 23. It is fair to question whether the 2011 All-Pro, who averaged 8½ sacks in his first five seasons, will ever become one of the NFL's most feared linemen again.

HAS JPP MOVED ON? FOR STARTERS, HE HAS DELETED EVERY IMAGE OF HIMSELF FROM WHEN HE HAD ALL 10 DIGITS.

PIERRE-PAUL SITS in the foyer of his yellow Spanish-style home in Boca Raton, Fla., recounting all the little things that have changed in nine months. Putting in his two massive diamond-stud earrings? That's tougher these days. Wiping his glasses? More difficult still. Buttoning his shirt? Tricky at first, but easier now after all the rehab, the continued care of specialists—and a trip to the tailor. In place of a button on the left cuff, all of his dress shirts now have snaps.

The hand remains a curiosity, a hardened, scarred appendage crisscrossed with burn marks. He gets looks. He knows that every handshake henceforth will be met with uneasy eyes. But it's no badge of shame. "I have no regrets at all [about the accident]," he says. (Pierre-Paul was never charged in Florida, where fireworks that explode are prohibited.) Instead, he points to how it has changed him. "I carry myself differently. I look at things differently. I try not to put myself in horrible situations anymore. I have a lot of people depending on me—even people I didn't know depended on me."

Among these are the ones he meets through social media, where he's lately ramped up his presence on Twitter and Instagram, sharing photos and videos of his hand and his rehab. Pierre-Paul says he receives messages all the time from people with disabilities and amputations far worse than his; they thank him for helping them get out of bed in the morning.

On his first day out of the hospital, last July, he was having his car washed when he met a man who'd lost his entire arm in a motorcycle accident. Pierre-Paul was struck when the stranger noticed his damaged hand and asked, "How are you doing?"

How am I *doing?* Pierre-Paul said to himself. He began to feel fortunate that his accident hadn't been worse.

Pierre-Paul has owned his mistake, going so far as to delete from his phone and social-media feeds every image of himself from the days when he had all 10 digits. "I could dwell on it, like, *Damn, I wish I had that finger*," he says, "but when I look in the mirror, I'm happy. Thank the Lord—it could have been worse."

After signing another one-year show-me deal with the Giants on March 8—payable up to $10.5 million, with $4.25 million guaranteed; damaged hand and all, a pass rusher such as Pierre-Paul is hard to find—he's training furiously this spring. He has a special wrist strap fitted with hooks to help him lift weights, and he has stocked his locker with two items that he believes will help him be an All-Pro again. The first is a special glove, custom-fitted by Under Armour for his right hand. Mercifully, he's been given the green light to ditch the club that hampered him last season.

Beside it, a hospital wristband. It tells Pierre-Paul all he needs to know about responsibility, about mistakes and how they can turn a man to rubble or help shape him instead. Neatly printed across the tag, which he'll look at before every game this year, is a name. DON X. □

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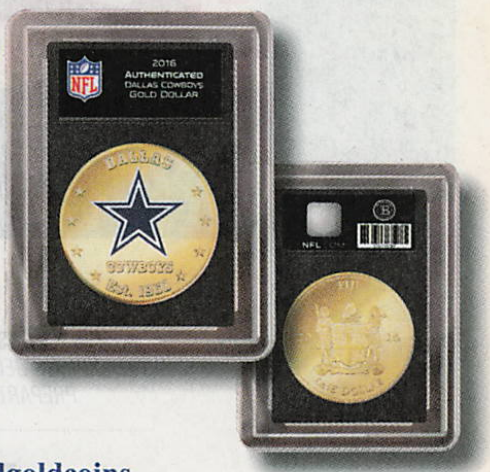

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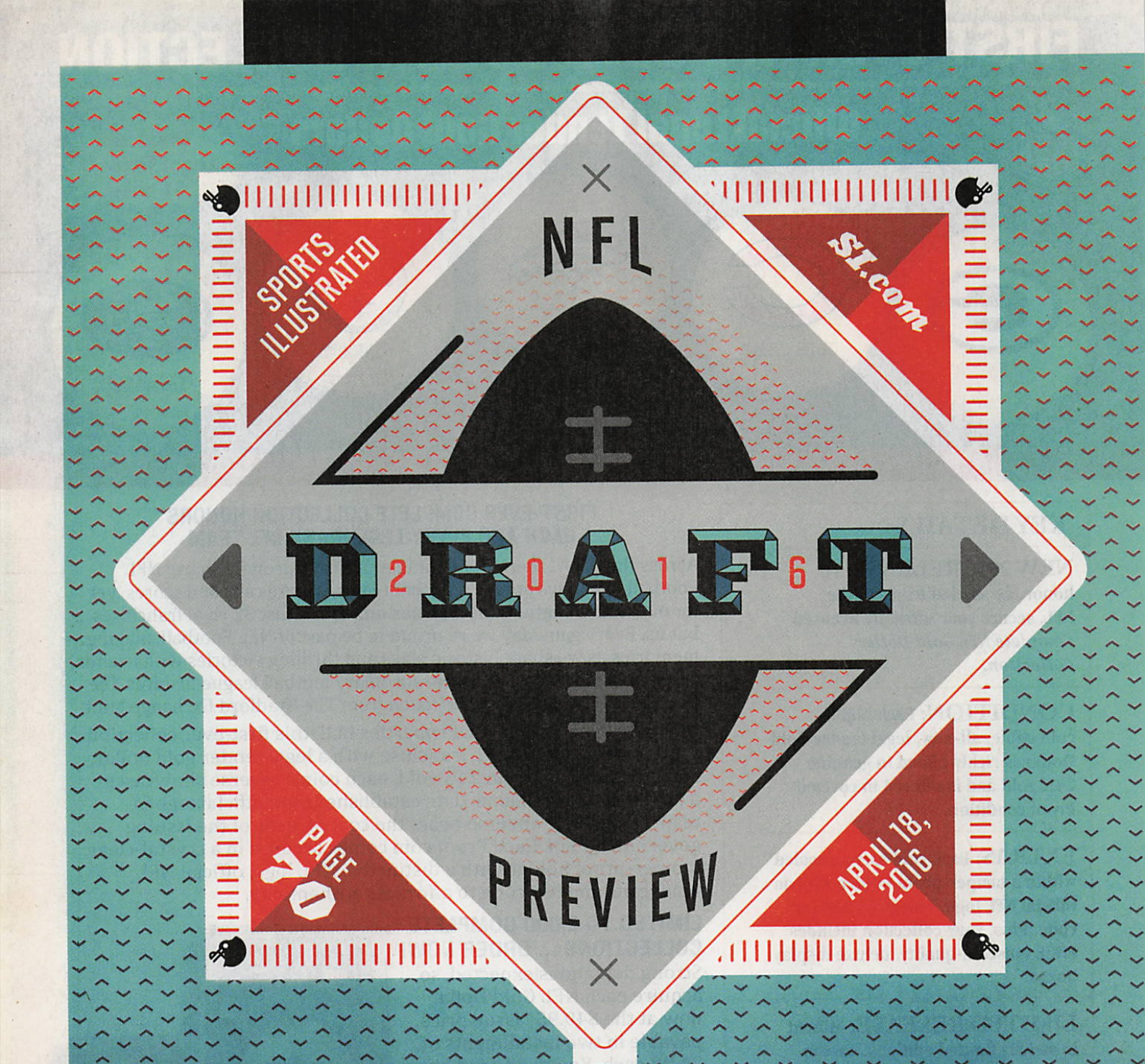

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THE CHAMPIONSHIP INGREDIENTS available at last year's NFL draft whetted the appetite of even the most casual college football fan. The Bucs and the Titans, picking first and second, respectively, each needed a franchise quarterback—and there sat the previous two Heisman Trophy winners, each with his particular set of skills. There, too, for the taking was Amari Cooper, a flawless receiver prospect from the most successful college program of the decade, and Todd Gurley, who some considered a transformational talent at running back and the best college player at the position since Adrian Peterson. Even to a Jets fan whose annual college intake is a hung-over New Year's Day spent bowl-surfing on the couch, that sells.

The 2016 version? It simply isn't *that* kind of draft. We're on the far other end of the spectrum, the type of draft where crystal-football-hoisting QBs and All-America receivers from storied programs are replaced by hog mollies and anonymous hard hitters. Sure, there will be QBs. But they'll be, from the top, a two-year starter on an FCS team (Carson Wentz) and a small-handed product of a West Coast program that plays its football after most of the country has hit the pillow (Jared Goff). There will be receivers, but they'll come later, and they'll be less polished than in the recent past. For the first time in five years, the top of the draft is headlined by defense—by run stuffers and shutdown corners, by sack men and sideline-to-sideline jacks-of-all-trades. And honestly, that absence of sexy skill-position players would usually feel like a horse pill going down. Slowly. Over three days.

But the Broncos just made that gulp a whole lot smoother.

Let us consider Denver's Super Bowl formula. Sure, by the end of that playoff run Von Miller *(below right)* started to look less like he was playing football and more like he was Godzilla kicking down buildings. But the Broncos' win was fueled by their entire group up front. Malik Jackson (now a Jaguar) and Derek Wolfe dominated the interior of the Panthers' O-line, and the result was Jonathan Stewart gaining just 29 yards on 12 carries. With the running game cut off, the Carolina passing game, too, unraveled.

And while there probably isn't a Von Miller in this draft—because there isn't a Von Miller in *most* drafts—there *are* players who fit the other archetypes that comprised Denver's defense. Just like Jackson (6' 5", 293 pounds), Mississippi State's Chris Jones (6' 6", 310) is a tall, quick defensive tackle **(1)** who lived rent-free in opposing backfields last year. Wolfe was a block-eating, run-stuffing force for Denver's D. This crop has plenty of guys like that, including the Alabama duo of A'Shawn Robinson **(2)** and Jarran Reed **(3)**.

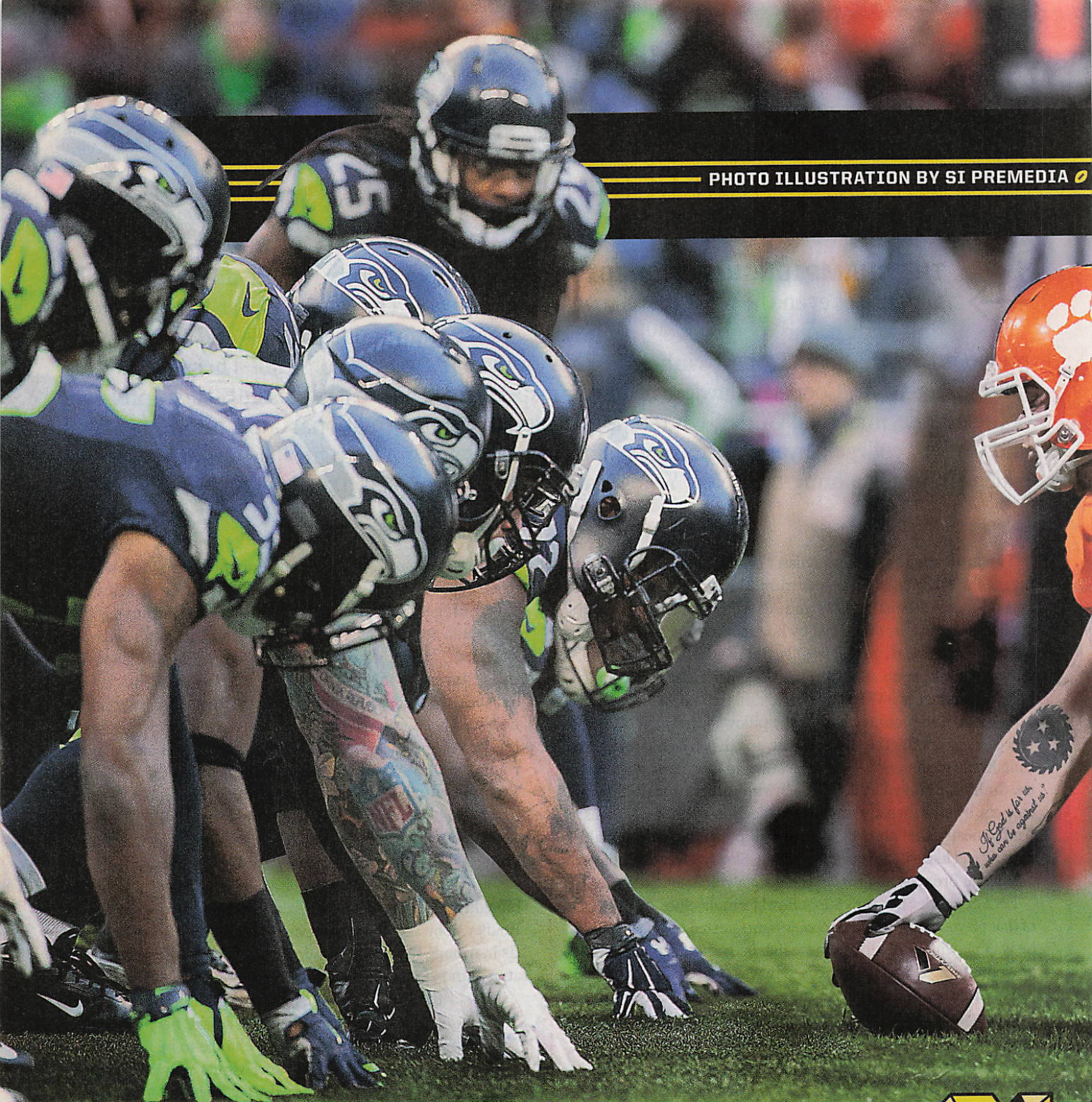
More than any one particular trait, what set the Broncos' front four apart was the full range of their skill sets. Jackson and Miller, for example, were just as adept against the run as they were rushing the passer. And here's where this draft gets so exciting: These are the very strengths that have Ohio State's Joey Bosa *(below left)* and Oregon's DeForest Buckner **(4)** generally considered the top two D-linemen of this class. Staying on the field for all three downs inherently makes a player more valuable; for a linebacker, that's typically tied to how well he moves. And *move* happens to be what, collectively, this year's group does best. UCLA's Myles Jack tears around like a running back because, well, he used to be one. Ohio State's Darron Lee, to name another, has the 232-pound frame and 4.47 speed that make him a prototypical 'backer in today's NFL. The Bears pried Danny Trevathan away from that Denver defense (four years, $24.5 million) because they feel the same way about him.

The Broncos' secondary was the accent piece that in the playoffs brought the whole room together: a pair of big, physical corners in Bradley Roby and Aqib Talib; plus do-it-all chameleon Chris Harris Jr. Among this class, Florida State's Jalen Ramsey **(5)**—who, at 6' 1" and 209 pounds with a 41½-inch vertical leap, looks like the next step in the human evolution chart—is most like Roby. And Clemson's smart, fiery Mackensie Alexander **(6)** has a chance to be like Harris.

Every Super Bowl winner spawns imitators. Teams get a real-time look at a collection of talent that works, they hire assistants from that team to run their own, and the clones multiply. This constant race to keep up has mixed results, but this much can be said about the 2016 draft: If a franchise is looking to add functional pieces to a modern NFL defense, the players are there. There may not be much of a visceral thrill when those names are called this month—really, who *does* get cheered at the draft?—but there will be plenty to celebrate when one of these draftees is the reason some team lifts the Lombardi Trophy.

—Robert Mays

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NELL REDMOND/AP; TIM WARNER/CSM/AP; VASHA HUNT/AL.COM; RYAN KANG/AP; DON JUAN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES; JIM DEDMON/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP; STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES; JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES



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PRO VS. C

SI'S NFL WRITER GREG A. BEDARD AND COLLEGE FOOTBALL SCRIBE ANDY STAPLES ASK, ***Is the college***
THEY DETAIL THE GROWING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO, TRACE THE ORIGINS OF THE SPLIT, EXPLAIN TH

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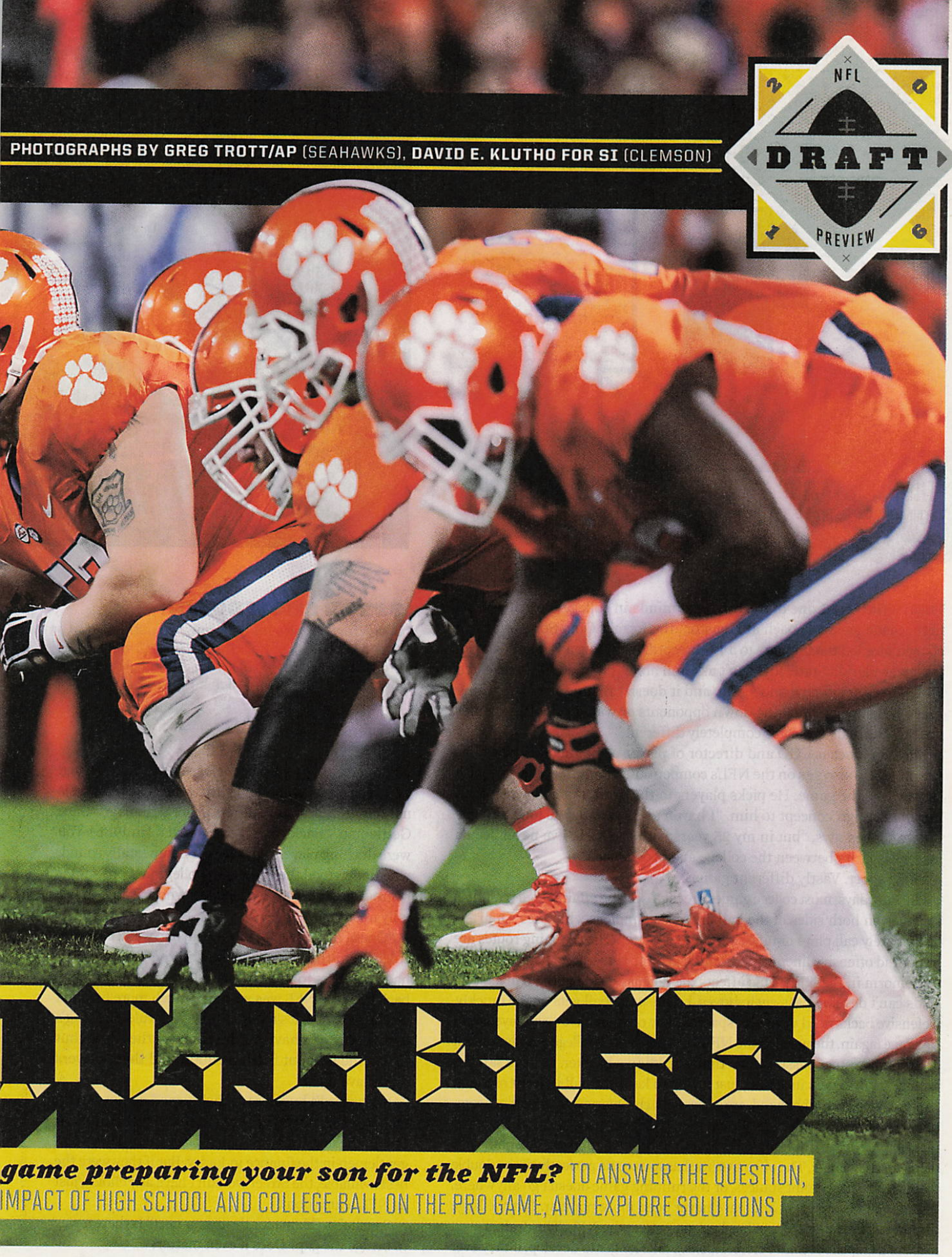
NFL DRAFT PREVIEW 2016



COLLEGE

game preparing your son for the NFL? TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE BALL ON THE PRO GAME, AND EXPLORE SOLUTIONS

THE NFL IS FACING A FUTURE OF LOST FUNDAMENTALS AND LESS TIME TO TEACH

BY Greg A. Bedard

STYLE SHOWDOWN

Greg Ward Jr. (above) and Houston used an up-tempo spread attack to beat the pro-style 'Noles in the Peach Bowl. Like Ward, Lynch (12) rarely took a snap directly from center, which scares NFL teams.

TOM HERMAN IS one of the brightest minds in college football. In his first season as head coach at Houston, the former Ohio State offensive coordinator led the Cougars to a 13–1 record, including a Peach Bowl victory over Florida State. Just don't ask him about pro football. "I do catch NFL games every now and again, and it doesn't remind me of anything that I watch when breaking down opponents or watching college games on TV," Herman says. "It's completely different."

Stephen Jones is COO and director of player personnel for the Dallas Cowboys. He also sits on the NFL's competition committee, charged with stewarding the game. He picks players in the draft, but college football is still a foreign concept to him. "I haven't been around as long as some others," Jones says, "but in my 25 years with the NFL, I've never seen a larger disparity between the college and pro games."

Same sport. Vastly different games.

On Saturdays, most college games are high-scoring affairs ruled by simple schemes on both sides of the ball and even simpler techniques. Quarterbacks rarely call plays or take snaps under center. The receiving routes are basic, and offensive linemen don't often get into three-point stances, which is the norm in the NFL. This affects the defensive side of the ball as well. Ends can't develop pass-rush moves, because the ball gets out so quickly. Defensive backs need to protect space, so few of them have ever played man coverage (again, the norm in the NFL). Linebackers in college are more adept at dropping into a passing zone than shedding a blocker. College safeties are like goalkeepers in soccer, just trying to keep the ball in front of them.

Sundays, on the other hand, are a chess match. Quarterbacks bark out complicated play calls in the huddle and then change them at the line. Defenses bluff in and out of different looks and then bring an unorthodox blitz with press-man coverage. The offensive line has to execute perfectly timed double teams from three-point stances, or the running game doesn't go anywhere.

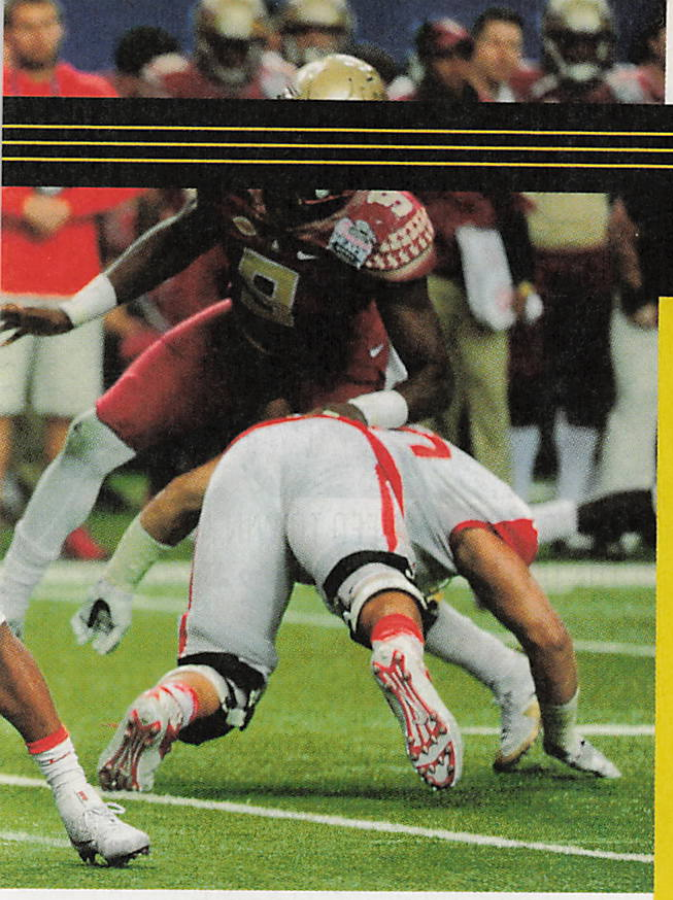
Both games are great and have never been more popular. But the huge disconnect between the two has begun to affect the NFL. The draft is even more of a crapshoot than before. Rookies take longer to develop, if they ever do. As a result, play in the NFL seems to be suffering. "What makes it so tough is [that] the college game is not our game," says Panthers general manager Dave Gettleman. "Back when I first started [in 1986], you were drafting players who were fundamentally sound, who understood the game. The college and pro games [were] similar. Now? You get guys who are fundamentally unsound.

"One of the concepts [Bill Walsh] had was a two-year rule: From the day you walked in the building, you had two years to prove your value to the 49ers. Well, back then the NFL was getting a much more finished product. So now it's really a three-year rule. Nothing's easy. A guy can have all the talent in the world, but this game is about fundamentals, and these players don't have them."

If Harvard's business school turned out graduates who needed three years to get up to speed on Wall Street, the institution wouldn't place many ladies and gentlemen in the finance industry. But if they were the best available, the Street wouldn't have any choice, just as NFL teams don't.

So who's to blame for the disconnect? Is there a way to bridge the gap? Does it even matter?

SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES (WARD)



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP (LYNCH)

"IN MY 25 YEARS IN THE NFL," SAYS DALLAS'S JONES, "I'VE NEVER SEEN ***a larger disparity between the college and pro games.***"

TO ILLUSTRATE THE recent struggles of players entering the NFL, take a look at the 2013 draft. Of the men taken in the top half of the first round, it's likely that only five (DE Ezekiel Ansah, Lions; OT D.J. Fluker, Chargers; OT Eric Fisher, Chiefs; DT Sheldon Richardson, Jets; DT Star Lotulelei, Panthers) would be drafted that high today if there were a redraft. And none would be considered elite at his position. That's just three seasons out.

In 2010, another quarterback-poor draft, the top 16 produced eight players who once were or still are looked at as elite (DT Ndamukong Suh, Lions; DT Gerald McCoy, Buccaneers; OT Trent Williams, Washington; FS Eric Berry, Chiefs; OT Russell Okung, Seahawks; CB Joe Haden, Browns; DE Jason Pierre-Paul, Giants; FS Earl Thomas, Seahawks).

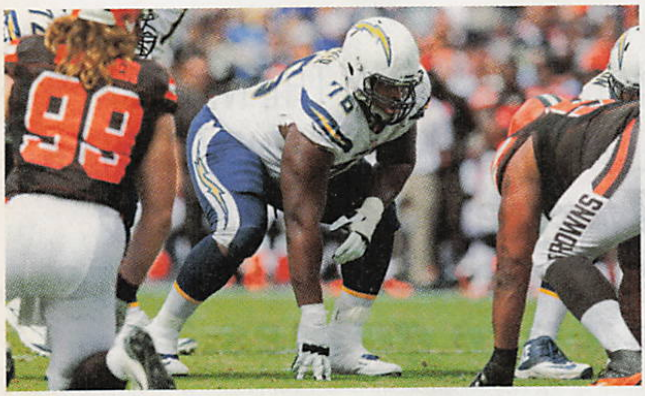
Part of the blame for the drop-off goes to the early 2000s proliferation of certain college offenses: the spread, the Air Raid, Art Briles's hybrid at Baylor, and any other combination that exploits the width of the field and the hashmarks (21½ feet wider than those in the NFL) and a fast tempo to stretch a defense. There's also college football's rule that restricts meeting and practice time to 20 hours per week. "Most schools are trying to run the simplest, fastest thing they can run," says Texans coach Bill O'Brien, previously the coach at Penn State. "[In] the spread offense there's not that much blocking technique and reading coverage technique, and . . . it's kind of basketball on grass."

There are other factors at play too. In 2011, as spread and fast-paced offenses were reaching critical mass in college football, changes were made in the NFL's collective bargaining agreement. Players' safety had become a matter of paramount concern, and the league acquiesced to demands from the union to curtail off-season activity. Instead of arriving for voluntary workouts on March 15, players—including those coming off their rookie seasons—didn't have to report until the third Monday in April (first Monday for teams with new head coaches). So players who don't make the playoffs have nearly four months off. And once they do report, there are no pads or contact drills before training camp. Even in camp, practices in pads have been dramatically cut back. Same goes for the regular season.

"The biggest jump for a player as an offensive lineman was from his rookie season to his second season," says Rams offensive line coach Paul Boudreau, but the new rules have slowed that process. "From January until April you can't talk to him, you can't touch him. He's behind the curve."

The lag puts a premium on college players who are further along in their development. "It's an advantage for a guy at the Iowas and Stanfords, the Alabamas, Wisconsins—they play an NFL style. I've coached wishbone guys, I've coached veer guys. It's my job to get them up to speed, but if I can't because of the CBA, at the end of the day that owner still wants to win a Super Bowl. How do you get those guys ready? It's hard."

ARE THERE SOLUTIONS? Maybe it's time to talk about bringing the college and pro hash marks into alignment. In 1972, in an effort to boost offensive production, the NFL narrowed its marks to the width of the goalposts. If the NCAA adopted NFL standards, most experts believe, the spread would vanish overnight because defenses wouldn't be stressed to cover the wide side of the field. "Yes, [a switch to NFL standards] would change the game dramatically," says Herman. "There wouldn't be formations into the boundary, and the concept it puts on the defense wouldn't exist. The kinds of throws we



ask our QBs to make would be different as well."

What about a compromise: splitting the difference? "Not much of an impact," Herman says.

There could be some internal pressure in college football to adopt more NFL techniques and strategies if recruits realize that schools that play more pro-style schemes produce more NFL-ready players. "An 18-year-old coming out of high school has the option of playing for a team that's running a more pro-style offense," says Texans quarterback Brock Osweiler, who played his final two seasons at Arizona State in an up-tempo scheme and was thus viewed as a developmental player (second round) in the 2012 draft. "If I ever have a son and he's the quarterback and he's getting recruited, I think that's something you certainly have to look at. Because it would definitely ease the transition to the NFL."

GOOD POINT
Products of a pro-style scheme, like Bama's Fluker, have had an easier transition.

Of course, those changes may never come, and NFL teams can't afford to wait. Teams have to consider everything from new schemes to alterations of the CBA and the creation of a developmental league. "You have to evolve and change with the times," says Steelers general manager Kevin Colbert.

Cam Newton is the only college quarterback from a run-based spread offense to have had sustained success in the NFL, and it's no secret why: Panthers coach Ron Rivera and offensive coordinator Mike Shula met the talented passer halfway, successfully blending old-school NFL offensive principles with the innovative tactics used on the college level. "Coaching makes a difference in this league, especially as we've gotten further and further away from the fundamentally sound kids we used to get," says Gettleman. "Ron and his staff have done a great job."

NFL coaches seem to be looking to the league office for help in doing their job better. O'Brien is among those coaches who would like to see the off-season rules apply differently to two categories: rookies through third-year players, and veterans. "I'm not the only head coach who's talking about this," O'Brien says. "Let us use shoulder pads, helmets, whatever with the younger guys. And let's get them in here earlier in the off-season. We're just trying to get it so the product on the field doesn't suffer, because I don't think you're going to be able to change the college game."

Meanwhile the gap between college and pro football appears to be widening. The pro game is suffering as a result, as are the players caught in between. It's time for a conversation between the camps, one more extensive than their brief annual meetings at the scouting combines. Both games are great, but they could be better if they worked more closely together. □

2 COLLEGE COACHES NEED TO WIN AND CLOSE THE TALENT GAP BY Andy Staples

THE NFL COACHES and personnel men who took the podium at the combine kept repeating the same complaints. College offensive linemen rarely operate from a three-point stance. College quarterbacks, for the most part, don't take snaps from under center. Cardinals coach Bruce Arians summed up the accumulated angst best when discussing the debate over whether to play rookie quarterbacks: "You're going to get your ass fired trying to get this kid developed."

NFL coaches fail to understand that the lack of development exists because every coach at every level lives in constant fear of getting canned. As coaching pay has skyrocketed in college football, the pressure to win has risen proportionally. Two years and a losing streak is all the tolerance an FBS-level coach can reasonably expect, so, like his NFL counterparts, he may not have time to develop players. He must run schemes that allow him to plug in what he gets from high schools.

And while an NFL coach has multiple first-round picks on his roster, there's a good chance that a college coach doesn't have any future top choices. The best high school players, given the option to choose, tend to flock together. In the past five years only 49 of 127 FBS schools have signed a recruit ranked in the top 100 by Scout.com. Meanwhile, 11 schools signed 60% of the top 100 players. Alabama, winner of four of the past seven national titles, led the way with 48 top 100 players. Ohio State, winner of the 2014 title, signed 34. Florida State, winner of the '13 title, signed 29. So, NFL coaches: Imagine designing a scheme for a team that boasts one or two first-round draft picks to beat a team that suits up dozens. Would you run something similar to what those teams run and get your head kicked in by superior athletes or would you try something wacky? Welcome to college football.

And where do the colleges get their players? From high school coaches under similar pressure to win but with at best a limited ability to recruit players. "The thing about the high school level is, it's all about survival," Baylor coach Art Briles says. "You're coach-

GREG TROTTA/SI

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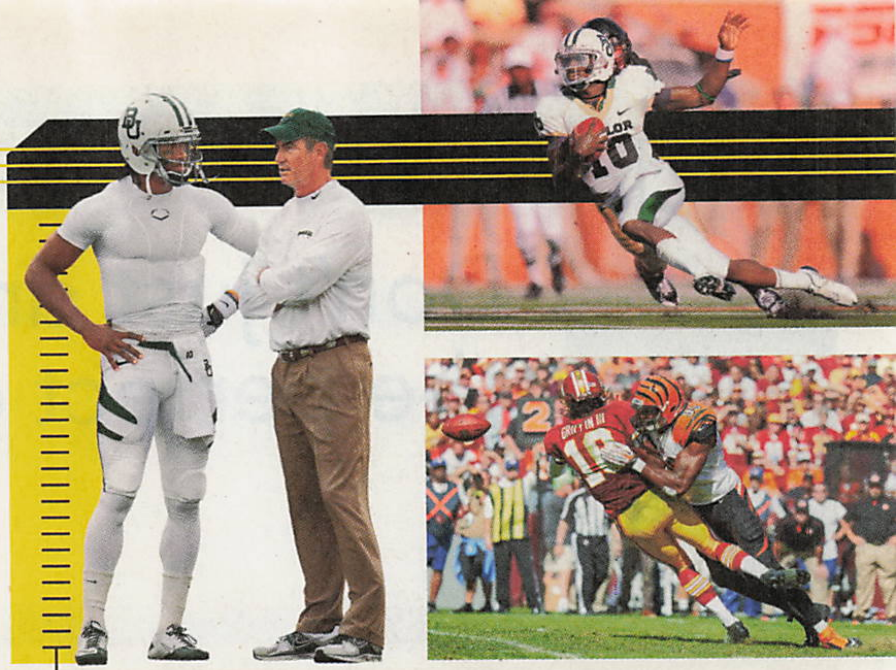

BAIL OUT

Briles's players have struggled to adjust to the NFL. Griffin (above left, with Briles) used his athleticism and a unique scheme to excel at Baylor (top) but has floundered as a pro (above right).

ing who walks through the door. So you have to be innovative." Briles spent 16 seasons—and won four state titles—as a high school coach in Texas before moving to college football. Baylor's offense, which has ranked in the nation's top 10 in yards per play in four of the past five seasons, was born on high school practice fields in towns called Hamlin, Georgetown and Stephenville. To get more students to come out for football, Briles crafted an offense that used multiple receivers and forced defensive backs to play those receivers one-on-one. It made the game more fun, and the best athletes in the school, who might have stuck with basketball rather than play in the wing T, joined the football team. Years later an offense built on the same concepts thrives at the college level.

The catch is that this offense looks nothing like the ones favored by NFL coaches. Briles is a dyed-in-the-wool veer guy, so his linemen use the three-point stance regularly, but the Bears often run packaged plays, in which the quarterback has the option after the snap to hand off or throw. The linemen typically block the run play, so a tackle, such as 2016 draft prospect Spencer Drango, isn't often asked to pass-set the way he'll be asked to in the NFL. Meanwhile, the receivers routinely line up outside the numbers, which before Briles was unheard of, even in spread offenses. This eliminates the out route, but it forces the safeties to commit to playing either the pass or the run, which helps the quarterback make a read that wouldn't be so obvious in a different alignment.

It also allows the quarterback to squeeze off plays quickly, since he doesn't have to adjust the protection at the line of scrimmage the way an NFL quarterback would. Baylor's QB is almost always in the shotgun, too. Taken together, all this means that Baylor's linemen, quarterbacks and receivers will have to relearn their positions in the NFL. But why should Briles change to accommodate coaches at the next level? He inherited a perennial doormat for the 2008 season, and he has since won the Big 12 twice. Baylor's football success has increased donations and allowed the Bears to build a palace of a stadium along the Brazos River.

The Bears' offense, long thought too crazy even in the innovation-friendly world of college football, has taken root elsewhere. Tulsa runs it under former Baylor coordinator Philip Montgomery. Syracuse will install it this year under new hire Dino Babers. Even at blue-blood Texas, coach Charlie Strong needs Sterlin Gilbert, a former Briles graduate assistant and former Babers and Montgomery coordinator, to produce in his first year as the Longhorns' coordinator, or the entire staff might wind up unemployed.

CLEMSON'S DABO SWINNEY found himself in a similar situation five years ago. He ran a diverse offense after taking over at Clemson in 2008, following the midseason ouster of Tommy Bowden. But after going 6–7 in '10, Swinney needed production. So he hired Tulsa offensive coordinator Chad Morris, who was only one year removed from running the program at Lake Travis High in Austin. Morris brought an up-tempo spread just as quarterback Tajh Boyd became the starter. Receiver DeAndre Hopkins was a sophomore. Fellow receiver Sammy Watkins was an incoming freshman. "I had all these guys," Swinney says. "I ain't getting in the I formation." In '11 the Tigers were 16th in total yards and won their first ACC title since 1991.

The offense only got better from there. Even after Morris left to become the head coach at SMU, Swinney kept building on the scheme he and Morris designed. In 2015 the Tigers were the nation's only team to throw for more than 4,000 yards and run for more than 3,000. (Baylor, meanwhile, was the only team to run for more than 4,000 and throw for more than 3,000.) That offensive success helped the Tigers win the ACC and get to the national-title game. So why should Swinney, now well removed from the hot seat, change to satisfy NFL tastes?

In 2015, Multivoice, a wireless company, conducted a nationwide poll of more than 400 high school coaches, and 61% ran a spread offense. Only 8% ran a pro-style offense. "High school football is under attack with lacrosse and year-round baseball and year-round basketball," Swinney says. "Guys don't want to come out there and be a fullback and go hit the 'backer. The men in charge have had to adjust." High school coaches have. College coaches have. Guess who's left?

"To me, it used to be from the NFL down. The game is now from high school up," Swinney says. "That's your talent pool. And for the NFL, we're their talent pool."

NFL COACHES CAN take solace in knowing that a few college coaches believe running a pro-style offense gives them a recruiting advantage. They're willing to put in the time on the front end to develop players who didn't learn certain skills in high school. Florida State's Jimbo Fisher, for example,

GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GRIFFIN AND BRILES); DAVID BERGMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GRIFFIN AT BAYLOR); SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (GRIFFIN AT WASHINGTON)

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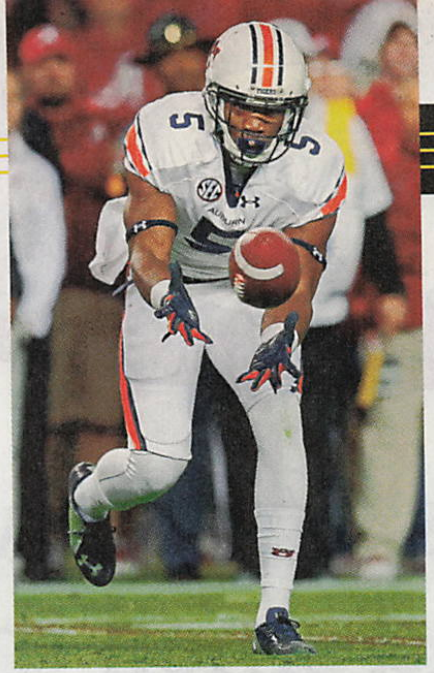

has produced three first-round quarterbacks (Christian Ponder, 2011; EJ Manuel, '13; Jameis Winston, '15) since taking over the Seminoles. In the past three drafts NFL teams have taken 29 Florida State players.

It seems logical that the college game might shift back in line with the NFL's if more coaches realize that they have a better chance of landing the best players if they prepare them well for the pros. Alabama (37 players drafted since 2011) teaches pro-style skills on both sides of the ball. An NFL-style offense contributed to Stanford's rise under Jim Harbaugh and has spurred the Cardinal's continued success under David Shaw. Harbaugh, meanwhile, now runs a similar offense at Michigan. Michigan State has won two of the past three Big Ten titles while running a pro-style offense. Perhaps the pendulum will swing back toward the I formation. "I hope so," Fisher says. "I think it's good for the game. But I think people are going to do what they can to be successful. There's too much money in the game."

"PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DO WHAT THEY CAN TO BE SUCCESSFUL," SAYS FISHER. ***"There's too much money in the game."***

Fisher is correct on that final point. Only the coaches at programs capable of landing elite talent can keep their jobs for the long term by running a pro-style offense. The coaches who constantly face a talent differential almost always opt for a scheme that allows them to shrink the gap. Meanwhile, the coaches who succeed with such schemes are reluctant to change because those plays work even better when run with five-star recruits. Urban Meyer created his spread-option offense in 2001 to help Bowling Green compete. Later it helped him win two national titles at Florida and one at Ohio State. Even Alabama's Nick Saban has ordered offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin to tweak the scheme to make it more like the ones run by the teams Alabama faces. Against Michigan State and Clemson in the most recent College Football Playoff, some of the Crimson Tide's greatest offensive success came through those packaged plays.

So what's an NFL coach to do? Here are a few possible solutions.

• *Project better.* College coaches have to guess what a 15-year-old will look like when he's 21, and the best projectors make the best recruiters. TCU's Gary Patterson signed Jerry Hughes as a tailback and turned him into an NFL defensive end. Perhaps some players would be better off at another position in the NFL, and personnel people simply need to use their imaginations.

Briles has one suggestion: "If I was a GM in the NFL or a head coach, I'd look at college receivers and see if they could be DBs. Those are your cats." In this draft class, one potential candidate for such a conversion is Auburn's Ricardo Louis. He measured 6' 2" and 215 pounds and ran a 4.43-second 40 at the combine. He's considered a marginal receiver prospect because of suspect hands, but wouldn't it be worth a spot on some team's practice squad to see if Louis can learn to cover wide receivers and tackle?

SWITCHBACK?
Louis (5), a receiver at Auburn, might make a better defensive back in the NFL if a team is willing to spend time developing him.

• *Keep looking to the basketball court.* College coaches have as difficult a time finding tight ends as NFL coaches do. Briles converted 405-pound lineman LaQuan McGowan into a tight end with some success, but Briles also knew he had a perfect tight end walking around Baylor's campus: Rico Gathers. The 6' 8", 275-pound Gathers didn't have time for Briles because he was the starting power forward on Baylor's basketball team. Now finished with his basketball eligibility, Gathers hopes to follow in the footsteps of Tony Gonzalez, Antonio Gates and Jimmy Graham and go from the NCAA tournament directly to the NFL. Meanwhile, VCU forward Mo Alie-Cox is a 6' 7" 250-pounder with one more year of hoops eligibility, huge hands and an open mind about which sport he might play after college.

• *Don't be so stuck in your ways.* Like his protégé Saban, Bill Belichick is the best at his level at adapting. It wasn't an accident that around 2011 the Patriots began using one-word audibles in their no-huddle, an offense often used outside of two-minute situations. What prompted the switch? According to a '12 *Boston Globe* story, it was an off-season visit from then Oregon coach Chip Kelly. The truncated play calls were already common in college, from Kelly's warp-speed Ducks in Eugene to all the Air Raid descendants of Hal Mumme and Mike Leach, scattered throughout the country.

Belichick, the best NFL coach of his generation, adjusted to what the players walking through the door already knew. So, NFL coaches, what sounds like the best course of action? Complain about the lack of offensive tackles in a three-point stance or redesign your schemes before you get your asses fired? □

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BY GREG BISHOP ● PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD ROSENBERG FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

HELLO, MY NAME IS Wentz

CARSON WENTZ arrives alone and on time at 8 a.m. sharp. He slides into the corner booth at the hottest breakfast spot in Fargo, N.D., where signs on the table advertise banana cream pie and a Friday fish fry and all-you-can-eat pancakes after midnight. No one bothers Wentz here, except the waitress.

"Welcome to Perkins."

Wentz orders a bacon-mushroom-and-tomato omelet lathered in hollandaise sauce, along with breakfast potatoes, pancakes and a cinnamon roll. It's good to be 23. He landed back in town at 10:30 p.m. one night earlier, after meeting with an NFL team he declines to name, and went home, straight to . . . the air mattress.

Along with five roommates and three dogs, Wentz lives in a house near campus that he describes as a "total college spot": five bedrooms, stains on the carpets, dishes piled high in the sink. And each night he retires with his 3-year-old golden retriever, Henley, to the air mattress in the living room, where they snuggle under a worn red comforter next to a small TV. There's no cable. Wentz can't even watch himself on ESPN. Between trips, his suitcases double as dressers.

FOR SOMEONE PEGGED TO BE ***the first QB taken in the NFL draft,*** THE KID FROM NORTH DAKOTA STATE IS ABOUT AS LOW-PROFILE AS THEY COME

For a guy who considers himself a planner, an organizer, Wentz's current living situation is the opposite of planned and organized. He has to remind himself: At least it's temporary. Because while his roommates study agricultural economics, physical and health education, chemistry and civil engineering, Wentz is prepping for something else: the jump from North Dakota State's starting QB to (probably) a top 10 pick in the NFL draft. In two weeks the guy crashing in the living room with his pooch will be the face of a pro football franchise.

"This stresses me out," Wentz says—and here he means his living quarters, not his draft status.

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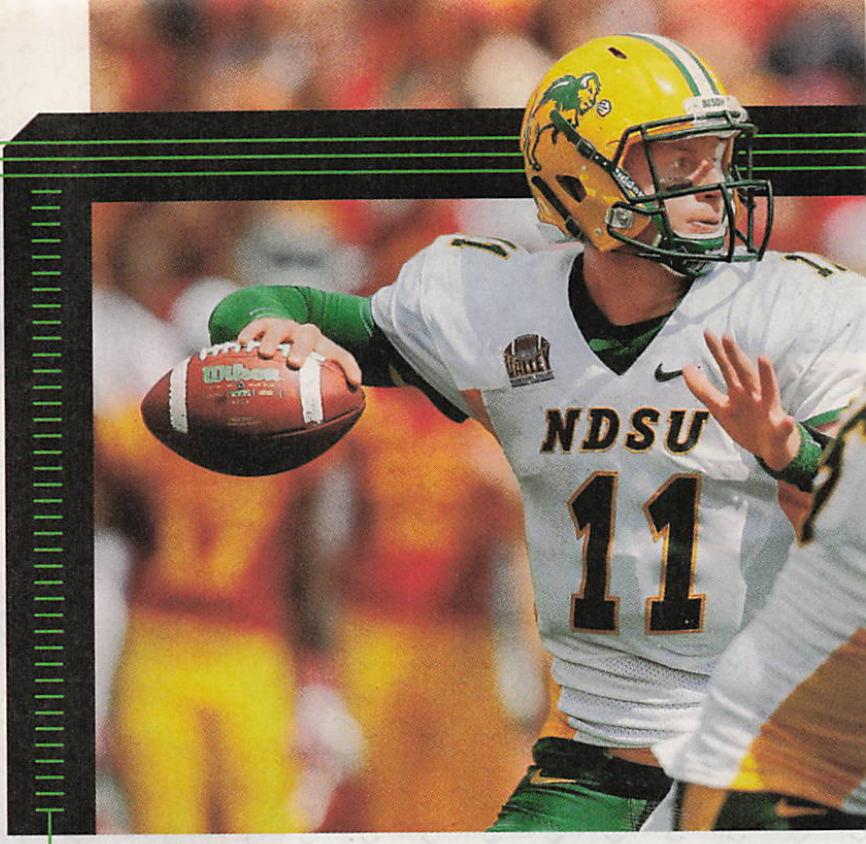


CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP

"I showed my agent [the house] a few weeks ago."

The agent's response? "No one's life is about to change more than yours."

Wentz has plans. On this day: Throw to former teammates, sign up for TSA PreCheck. Later this month: Decide whether he'll travel to Chicago for the draft, which begins on April 28; if so, buy a suit and cut his hair. Later this year: Become the most recent FCS quarterback to reach the NFL, after Tony Romo (Eastern Illinois), Joe Flacco (Delaware), Ryan Fitzpatrick (Harvard), Josh McCown (Sam Houston State). . . .

An older man approaches the table. "Excuse me," he says. "Good luck in the draft."

"Thanks," Wentz says, sheepishly. The attention, the fame—it's all a little much for someone who didn't receive a high-level Division I scholarship offer and who started for just 2½ years at quarterback in high school and college combined. Wentz is hearing that some QB-desperate team might trade up to draft him with the No. 1 pick. He is suddenly being compared with North Dakota's most famous athlete, Roger Maris.

DAKOTA FAWNING

Draftniks gush about Wentz's athleticism (he crushed at the combine) and composure, including a 5-0 record in the FCS playoffs.

IT'S TRUE. All of it. Yes, the Bison went 71–5 and won the FCS championship in each of Wentz's five seasons in Fargo, including the two he started. Yes, his report card was perfect, never even an A-minus. Yes, his course work in health and physical education meant that he regularly volunteered, sometimes with children.

Wentz is the latest (maybe the greatest) product of the most dominant football program that few fans outside the state have ever heard of. The Bison are winners of 13 national titles (eight in D-II; the last five in FCS), and they accounted for seven NFL players last season alone. Alumni include Jaguars coach Gus Bradley and 49ers general manager Trent Baalke. Wentz particularly loves the introductions at the Bison's Fargodome, where 19,000 supporters stand and scream throughout each home game (while 5,000 more wait eagerly on a list for season tickets). The lights dim before each kickoff and players sprint through an inflatable helmet as AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" blasts over the sound system.

Wentz grew up in Bismarck. His dad, Doug, a loan officer, played linebacker at Northern State, in Aberdeen, S.D.; his mom, Cathy Anhalt, works for the American Heart Association. They divorced when Carson was young. He was a hyperactive child. He never stopped, never stayed inside. Heard of three-sport athletes? Wentz competed in *six*. He begged his older brother, Zach, to play football, basketball, baseball, hockey, soccer and golf with him.

Sometimes that came with a price. Carson injured his right shoulder playing baseball one spring, preventing him from playing QB his junior year at Century High. By the time he was a 6' 5", 200-pound senior (from a 5' 8", 125-pound freshman), recruiters started to take notice. A few, anyway. Central Michigan called. So did North Dakota State.

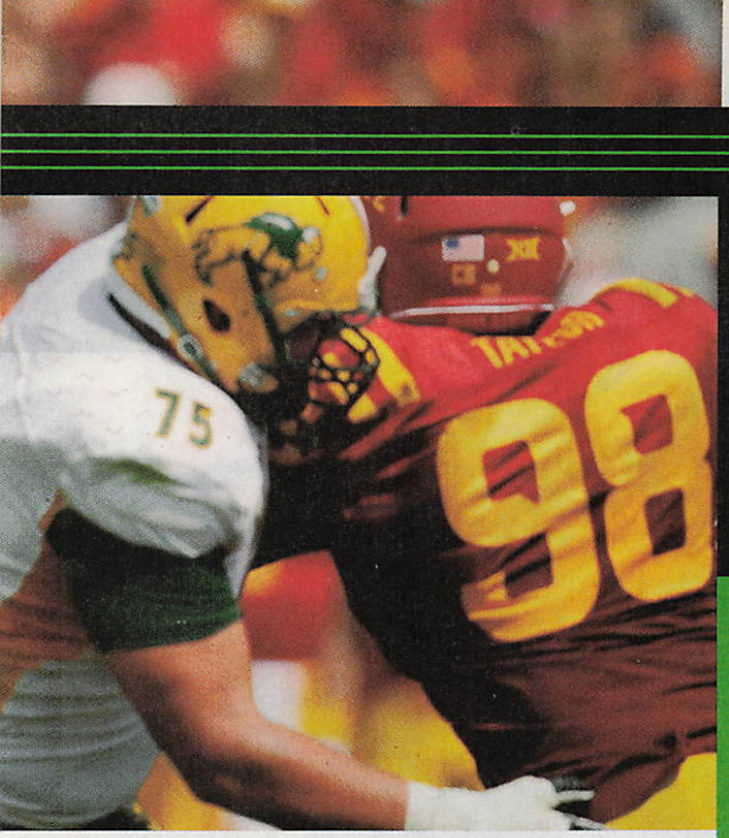
"He was a tall, lanky kid with a superstrong arm and speed," says Bison receiver Zach Vraa of those first three years Wentz spent backing up Brock Jensen (now with the CFL's Ottawa Redblacks). "He picked things up faster than anybody I've ever seen." Including forks. Wentz ate his way to 235 pounds, squeezing in four daily trips to the dining hall, where he lived by the motto *Eat until uncomfortable*. He also became an avid hunter in those early college years, stalking deer, pheasants, ducks and coyotes with a bow or a 12-gauge shotgun.

When Randy Hedberg became the Bison's quarterbacks coach before Wentz's junior season, the other staff members told him, "Wentz is special; he can play in the NFL." On the field, finally starting that season, Wentz suggested they might be right. He threw for 3,111 yards and scored 32 touchdowns.

More telling of his NFL-level composure: He led fourth-quarter comebacks in three of four 2014 playoff games. Against rival South Dakota State in the second round and Illinois State in the championship game, he scored game-winning TDs in the final minute, capping the drives with plays he called himself. "Like it was no big deal," says NDSU coach Chris Klieman.

WHEN THE Bison lost last October to South Dakota on a game-ending field goal, it marked their second defeat of the season and only their fifth since the start of 2011. Wentz went to bed that night with a sore right wrist; when he woke up it was swollen. An X-ray revealed a nondisplaced fracture. Wentz's throwing hand was broken.

The QB scheduled surgery for that Wednesday, but



when that day rolled around, coaches spied him in the quarterbacks' room, analyzing game film with his backup, Easton Stick. Wentz figured he wouldn't play another college game unless Stick won out in his absence, extending NDSU's season into the playoffs. "No pressure," he joked. "You only have my college career in your hands."

With Wentz mentoring him, Stick closed out the regular season with five straight wins, followed by three playoff victories. Wentz ran through the inflatable helmet one last time, on Senior Day, his wrist in a cast, but in the background he says some people encouraged him to think about forgetting 2015, preparing instead for the NFL draft. His response: "That sounds terrible."

Three weeks after Stick whipped Richmond 33–7 in the national semifinal, on the eve of the title game, Klieman announced that Wentz would be starting against top-ranked Jacksonville (Ala.) State. One day later the senior threw for 197 yards and ran for 79 more, scoring three times in the 37–10 triumph. Afterward, he wrapped Stick in a bear hug, stayed through the trophy presentation, then hopped a plane to Los Angeles, celebrating in first class with a single Coors Light.

His life forever changed at that exact moment.

BARELY 36 HOURS after his collegiate swan song, Wentz began working out in L.A. with journeyman quarterback Ryan Lindley. He'd called up Lindley, 26, a few weeks earlier and peppered him with questions for nearly three hours. Now they needed to find a way to satisfy those QB-needy teams who might consider drafting a small-school prospect with minimal starting experience against perceived lesser competition.

Their showcase started at the Senior Bowl, where Wentz played the first quarter for the North team and completed 6 of 10 attempts for 50 yards, whizzing tight spirals past the heads of the best defenders FBS had to offer. The quarterback picked up his case four weeks later at the combine, where he ran a 4.77 40-yard dash (tied for second among 15 passers) and crushed his interviews with general managers, as the buzz—*top 15! top 10! top five!*—began to build.

Wentz met NFL signal-callers Ben Roethlisberger and Blake Bortles. He huddled with dozens of pro teams. They all knew about the Bison, all the wins and the titles, and when they heard about Wentz's grades and the community service, they wondered, Was "too good to be true" *actually* "too good to be true"? "NFL people always look for flaws in lower-division players," says Hedberg. "I promise you, with Carson Wentz, they won't find any."

For his pro day at the Fargodome, on March 24, Wentz forsook the safe approach and showcased his mobility and arm strength with a variety of throws. No longer was anyone questioning whether he deserved to be drafted in the first round, only whether he should start right away or spend a few seasons marinating as a backup. "I gave him the Peyton Manning speech, the Tom Brady one," says former Buccaneers and Raiders coach Jon Gruden, who hosted Wentz as part of his *QB Camp* series on ESPN. "The relentless work ethic, the heart . . . I love the kid. He's one of the most pro-ready I've seen in a while."

While Gruden loves hyperbole about as much as Wentz loves pancakes, the consensus from less melodramatic experts has Wentz pegged as either the best or the second-best quarterback, after Cal's Jared Goff, in a draft that lacks both stars and passers. One major difference between the two QBs: Wentz excelled in an offense deemed by draftniks as pro style, which Wentz says means "under center, play-action, drop-back, shotgun, make reads, make checks, telling linemen where to slide. . . . We're doing all of it."

FORTIFIED BY his Perkins feast, Wentz points his gray Silverado pickup toward the Fargodome for yet another throwing session. To buy the truck, he borrowed money from his father, a loan he plans to repay with his signing bonus.

Out on the field he gathers his teammates and they stretch and run and catch in silence. The only sound: Wentz's passes whistling through the air, almost shrieking. He completes slants and out routes and comebacks, and then he leaves, directing the pickup back toward his house. There he'll find no draft speculation, no cable, no comparisons with Flacco or Goff—only Henley and five roommates and an air mattress just waiting to be deflated. □

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PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD ROSENBERG FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED ● BY ANDY STAPLES

LIVING ON THE EDGE

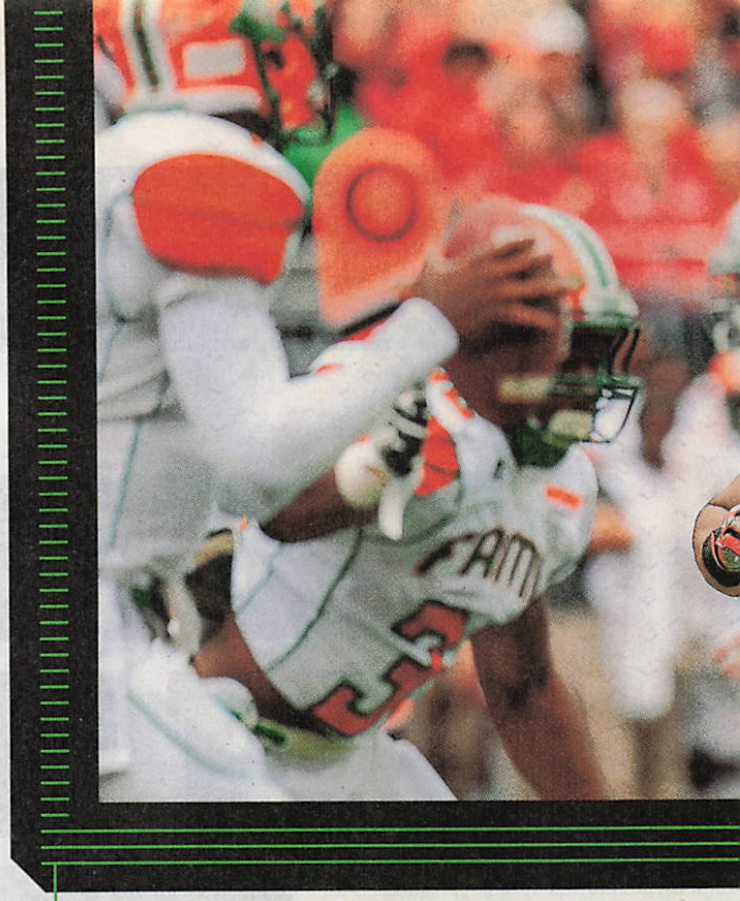
NOAH SPENCE chugged so much water on that September day in 2014. . . . He knew it wouldn't work, but he had to make one last-ditch effort to save the football career that he was, rather literally, about to piss away. The Ohio State defensive end could dilute his urine sample, but that sample contained a truth that could not be hidden.

Ten months earlier, when the recreational drug MDMA (or Molly) had first shown up in Spence's sample during a Big Ten–administered drug test, Spence lied to his coaches and to his parents. *Someone slipped Molly in my drink*, he told them. Greg and Helen Spence fought for their son. So did Buckeyes coach Urban Meyer. But Spence knew he couldn't fool them again.

The way he tells it, he laid off the Molly and the partying immediately after that first suspension, which kept him out of the Orange Bowl on Jan. 3, 2014, and the first two games of the '14 season. But over that spring and summer, the now-22-year-old says he resumed his habit of popping a pill or dissolving one in liquid. "I started hearing about people passing tests after [taking the drug]. I was like, 'Well, shoot. I don't even think they're going to *test* me again.' "

One more summer of fun—clubs, raves, house parties—then he would break up with Molly, right before he stepped back on the field as a promising junior who'd rung up eight sacks a year earlier. But on that final weekend before returning, Spence rolled one more time. "This," he remembers ratio-

LIFE WAS A DREAM—FOOTBALL, PARTIES, DRUGS—FOR NOAH SPENCE... UNTIL IT WASN'T. ***After a year of purgatory, he's hoping to gain the trust of an NFL team***



nalizing beforehand, "is my last Saturday to be free." Then, in the locker room the following Monday, an OSU trainer told Spence he'd need to provide a clean urine sample before reinstatement.

That wasn't going to happen, no matter how much water Spence chugged. Resigned to his fate, he dialed up a Harrisburg, Pa., number on his phone. "I have a problem that's going down *right now*," he told his father.

Spence has told this story dozens of times. It's embarrassing, but he feels it is in his personal, spiritual and financial best interests to keep telling it, keep coming clean. NFL scouts, coaches and execs keep asking about it. So do reporters. Hiding the details, Spence says, will do him no good.

After failing that second drug test, as he waited for the Big Ten to mull what would ultimately be a lifetime ban, Spence entered an AA-style rehab program—four-hour meetings four nights each week—in Columbus, where most of the enrollees are anonymous but Buckeyes players are not. He filled the remainder of the year with classes and treatment; then, sitting alone in his apartment in January, he watched confetti rain on his former teammates, who walloped Oregon 42–20 to win the national championship.

That same month, Spence transferred to Eastern Kentucky to prove he could still play. Every time the Colonels administered a random drug test, Spence was on the list. He passed every one. And that December—3½ years after finishing high school—he graduated from EKU with a degree in Business and Technology. More relevant to his NFL future, Spence aced his on-field exams, racking up 22½ tackles for loss and then, in January, dominating Senior Bowl practices.

ONE MORE SUMMER OF FUN, SPENCE ***then he would break*** HE STEPPED BACK ON THE FIELD AS A

He enters the draft as a 6' 2", 251-pound edge rusher who explodes off the line. He can bend around blockers like the liquid-metal villain in *Terminator 2*, a critical trait that separates elite pass rushers from pedestrian ones. And if a 3–4 team wants to convert him into a rush backer with occasional coverage duties? That wouldn't be much different from the hybrid Viper position he played at OSU. Physically, Spence has almost everything an NFL team could want in a pass rusher. Among defensive linemen, he tested third in the broad jump at the combine (10' 1"), fourth in the vertical (35.0 inches).

But Spence started the draft process with two waving red flags next to his name. He had a drug problem, and he had lied about it. So he tells the story now. "Tell the truth," his mother says, "and it'll set you free."

GREG SPENCE SHARES the story of his son's first letter-grade report card, believing that it offers a window into how a 19-year-old could party his way through drug-fueled weekends while earning All–Big Ten academic and football honors. That moment taught Greg that the eighth of his nine boys wouldn't need prodding to achieve. "He got all A's and two B-pluses, and he started crying," Greg says. "I appreciated the drive and determination, but I had to warn him: 'Look, man, you did your best. You should be happy.' "

Greg and Helen knew their son wanted to be the best at everything, but they also realized early on that he was smart enough to succeed in the classroom without spending too much time on his studies. That would come in handy at Ohio State, where Noah still made mostly A's and B's despite those chemically-enhanced weekends. Even after he failed his first drug test, Spence didn't think he had a problem. He could function as well as or better than his peers. Why worry?

When he failed a second test, he was forced to change his thinking—and come clean. "You love him, but you're disappointed," Greg says. "You don't want to show that in an angry way; he's already angry with himself."

Instead, the Spences huddled with Meyer to help Noah find treatment. At first, Spence wasn't sure he belonged in a program alongside addicts. But one woman changed his mind. "She just could not get off heroin," Spence recalls. "She was still doing it in the program. She would cry about it; it had some crazy hold on her. She lost her kids, her jobs. She was in and out of jail."

Spence's situation was not as dire, but one similarity resonated. "Before she became addicted," Spence says, "she was just like me: *I'm just going to party on the weekends. It's just going to be a weekend thing.*"

Having acknowledged the depth of his problems, Spence rediscovered his focus on the field. But after the second failed test, he was convinced his career was over. He'd left Harrisburg a hotshot recruit; now he would return to a McJob? "Nothing against that," he says, "but that's not what I wanted my life to be like."

JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES (AT OHIO STATE); DAVID STEPHENSON/AP (EASTERN KENTUCKY)

BENEATH THE MASK

For the former Buckeye, 2013 was a year of promise, '14 of penance and '15 of putting himself back on the map at Eastern Kentucky.

FIGURED—CLUBS, RAVES, HOUSE PARTIES—***up with Molly,*** RIGHT BEFORE PROMISING JUNIOR.

Even as Spence came to believe he would play again, he was still banned from the Big Ten. He considered entering the 2015 NFL draft, but his parents pushed him to transfer to an FCS school, where he could play another year without waiting, finish his degree and build some evidence of a lifestyle change, including a year's worth of passed drug tests to show NFL teams. (After school he would also begin drug testing every week, independently.) Spence weighed James Madison and Eastern Illinois—but then Meyer, who remains in contact with the Spences today, presented another option.

Dean Hood grew up a short bike ride away from Meyer in Ashtabula, Ohio. And while both friends found their way into college football coaching, their conversations rarely covered the sport. So when Meyer called up Hood, then the coach at Eastern Kentucky, to explain that he had a player who needed a second chance, Hood knew it was important. "That's one of the biggest plugs for what kind of person Noah Spence is," says Hood, who now coaches tight ends at Division I Charlotte. "Urban had never before called me about a kid."

Hood agreed early in January 2015 to drive the four hours to Columbus and meet with Spence, who was still enrolled in classes but banned from OSU's training facilities. When Hood arrived, he declared almost immediately that if Spence wanted to play for the Colonels, he'd be on every drug test list. "If the kid didn't want to get right, that would have scared him off," the coach says. "He had plenty of other places he could've gone."

Spence's transition to EKU wasn't seamless. Shortly after arriving on campus, he hurled an empty wine bottle toward a trash can, missed and was cited for public intoxication and second-degree disorderly conduct. Hood deemed the offense minor; he didn't suspend his new defensive end. But Spence knew: "My last straw."

That fall at Eastern Kentucky, Spence jotted down a few goals. He wanted 20 tackles for loss. (Check.) He wanted 15 sacks. (He settled for 11½.) He also wanted to be selected to play in the Senior Bowl, where he could again prove himself against the types of players he was facing back at Ohio State. And at season's end, the Ohio Valley Conference co–Defensive Player of the Year earned an invite to the all-star game in Mobile. There, he could better satisfy any football questions NFL teams had.

SCOUTS, COACHES and GMs ringed the field at Fairhope Stadium for Spence's first practice with the South team on Jan. 26. The largest men among these coaches—those who work with offensive and defensive linemen—stood two- and three-deep behind one end zone to observe one-on-one pass-protection drills. The Senior Bowl itself was four days away, but this is what they'd come to see. Could these offensive tackles kick slide? Did these defensive ends have any moves beyond a bull rush?

The coaches murmured and made notes as Texas Tech tackle Le'Raven Clark (a projected second-round pick) stoned massive Baylor defensive end Shawn Oakman. Spence had heard the buzz about Clark, so he figured he'd challenge the 6' 5" 316-pounder. A win here would prove that his skills hadn't slipped since leaving the Buckeyes.

Spence lined up in a two-point stance. At the snap, Clark slid left to meet the rusher, who took one step to the right and then stabbed his left foot into the ground and drove back inside. Spence's swim move cleared Clark's head, and Spence raced toward the invisible QB unimpeded. Clark had barely touched Spence. A collective "*Oooh!*" sprang from the players and coaches. Moments later, in a rematch, Spence went outside, wrapped around Clark and reached that phantom quarterback again.

Having shown enough on film and against fellow future draftees to satisfy coaches and GMs, Spence knew his draft position would come down to how he handled the off-field questions. He reports that his interviews at the Senior Bowl and at the combine went well. All Spence can do between now and the draft is tell his story.

He screwed up. He's sorry. He hopes a team will believe in him enough to select him in the first round. He also hopes he can provide a positive example for anyone else trying to climb back from rock bottom. "When you fall," he says, "that doesn't have to be the end of your story." □

NFL DRAFT PREVIEW 2016

PLAYER R
OFFENS

QB

PERUSING THE POCKET FOR THIS YEAR'S *Derek Carr* TO CARVE UP COVERAGE

1 JARED GOFF ▼
California (6' 4", 215 lbs.)
4,719 yards / 43 TDs / 13 INTs
Goff's feet and release are as quick as any quarterback's in this class, giving him the ability to snap off a pass in a split second. That trait allows him to slide the pocket, reset and still throw accurately downfield. There is zip on his deliveries, too—enough so that Goff shows confidence firing into tight windows.
CONCERNS Accuracy fluctuates, especially rolling out. Almost no experience under center.
NFL COMP Teddy Bridgewater

2 CARSON WENTZ ▼
N. Dakota St. (6' 5", 237 lbs.)
1,651 yards / 17 TDs / 4 INTs
He looks the part of an NFL quarterback, with size and height. He sounds it, too: Wentz has a composed, confident personality that should benefit him at the next level. He throws a beautiful ball, often fitting passes into teeny spaces. He's a talented play-action QB who worked both under center and out of the shotgun.
CONCERNS Can he pull off the FCS-to-NFL jump? Must be more consistent when throwing downfield.
NFL COMP Ben Roethlisberger

Top 40 time at combine
JEFF DRISKEL, La. Tech
4.56

3 PAXTON LYNCH ▼
Memphis (6' 7", 244 lbs.)
3,776 yards / 28 TDs / 4 INTs
His offense featured plenty of one-read-and-out passes, but Lynch is most impressive—and looks the most like an NFL QB—when he gets out of the pocket. His athleticism allows him to escape trouble; when he does, he keeps his eyes downfield, looking for receivers. Physically, he fits the NFL QB mold.

ANKINGS

SI'S DRAFT EXPERT STACKS UP AND BREAKS DOWN THE PROS-TO-BE, POSITION BY POSITION **BY CHRIS BURKE**

ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP

CONCERNS Proper footwork comes and goes. Played in a very QB-friendly offense.
NFL COMP Alex Smith

4 CONNOR COOK
Michigan State (6' 4", 217 lbs.)
3,131 yards / 24 TDs / 7 INTs
Cook is a proven QB from a winning program and pro-style system. A right-shoulder injury limited him late in 2015, but when he's healthy, he has a gun. He's not afraid to give his WRs a chance; many of his big plays came against tight, one-on-one coverage.
CONCERNS Middling completion percentage over three years. Potential character red flags.
NFL COMP Carson Palmer

5 DAK PRESCOTT
Mississippi St. (6' 2", 226 lbs.)
3,793 yards / 29 TDs / 5 INTs
Prescott improved enough as a passer in '15 to jump from a borderline-draftable talent to a possible Day 2 pick. He has a long way to go from here, but his combination of a quick release and an ability to read a defense gives him upside. Everyone is aware of his running ability: He's no fun to tackle in the open field.
CONCERNS Long-term project as a passer. DUI arrest in March; due in court this month.
NFL COMP Chase Daniel

6 VERNON ADAMS JR.
Oregon (5' 11", 200 lbs.)
2,643 yards / 26 TDs / 6 INTs
An academic issue delayed Adams's arrival as an FCS transfer last fall, then he broke a finger on his throwing hand; that dimmed his hype. But he was outstanding down the stretch, shredding the competition at the Shrine Game. Adams is most dangerous improvising

2015 FBS passing yards leader
BRANDON DOUGHTY, Western Kentucky
5,055

when a play breaks down; he can throw from a variety of angles and tests all areas of the field.
CONCERNS Well below desired QB size. Playmaker mentality leads to avoidable mistakes.
NFL COMP Russell Wilson

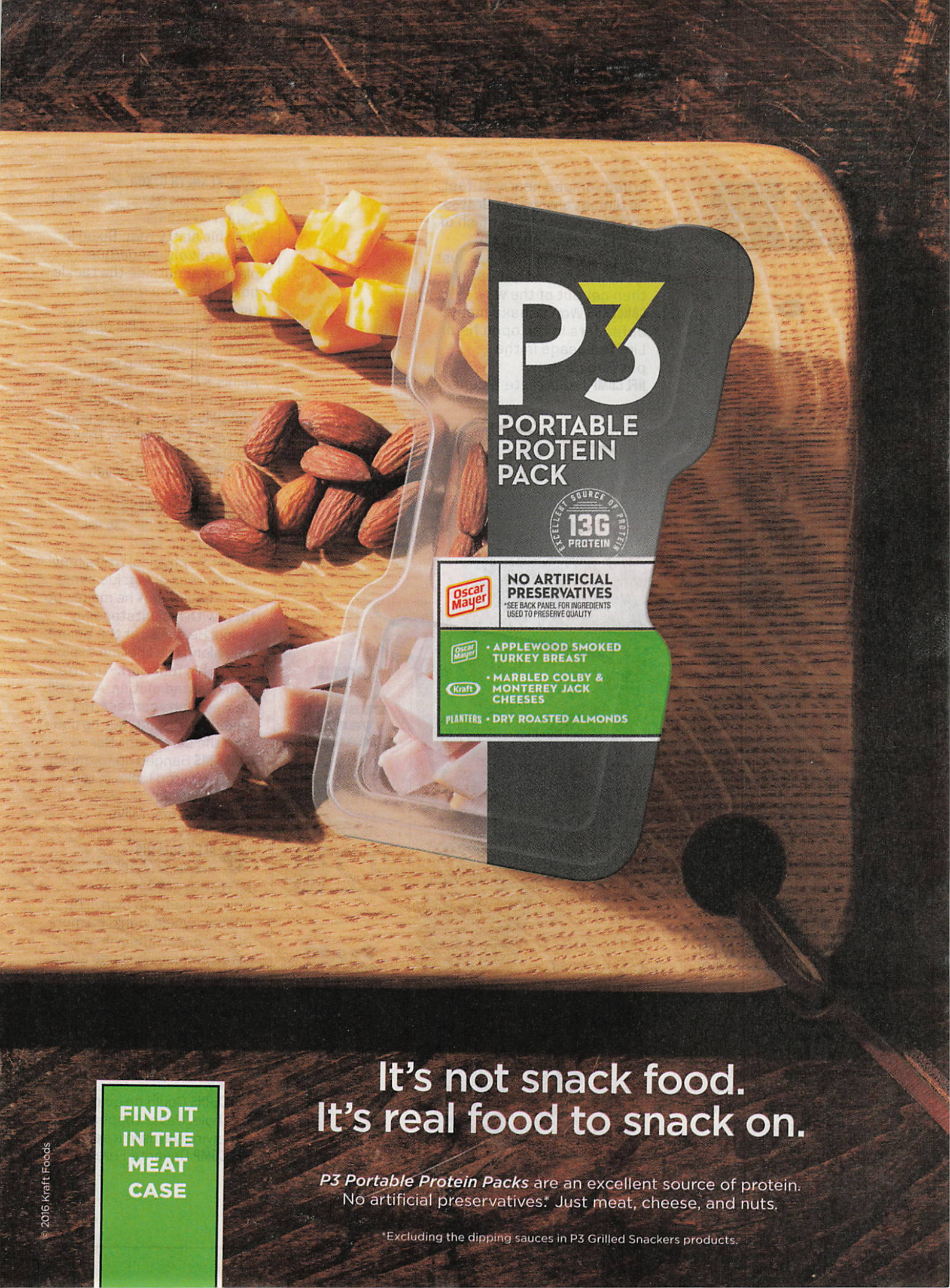
7 CHRISTIAN HACKENBERG
Penn State (6' 4", 223 lbs.)
2,525 yards / 16 TDs / 6 INTs
The trick in drafting Hackenberg is to try to block out all that went wrong over the past two seasons and focus on his promise. He still has the size that NFL teams covet, and he can throw darts, both short and downfield, when he's given time. His best days came in '13, under current Texans coach Bill O'Brien, in a pro-style attack.
CONCERNS Does he have any confidence left? He shows little touch or consistency.
NFL COMP Ryan Mallett

8 CARDALE JONES
Ohio State (6' 5", 253 lbs.)
1,460 yards / 8 TDs / 5 INTs
The entire football world saw the positives of Jones's game when he led Ohio State to the national championship in '15. There are not many guys his size with rocket arms out there. Jones creates huge plays with the deep ball and can frustrate pass rushes by escaping trouble.
CONCERNS Very limited experience as a starter. Bails out rather than going through his progressions.
NFL COMP Logan Thomas

9 KEVIN HOGAN
Stanford (6' 3", 218 lbs.)
2,867 yards / 27 TDs / 8 INTs
Aiming to gamble on a high-ceiling QB project? Look elsewhere. Hogan is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get pick: He's an intelligent leader with an impressive college résumé; he can move and throw, diagnosing defenses on the fly; and he can cause damage with his feet, as a scrambler or in the read-option.
CONCERNS Elongated passing motion must be sped up. Ugly footwork often leads to ducks.
NFL COMP Austin Davis

10 BRANDON ALLEN
Arkansas (6' 1", 217 lbs.)
3,440 yards / 30 TDs / 8 INTs
While there's not a whole lot of flash in Allen's game, he has an extensive background (34 straight starts) in a pro-style system. He doesn't take unnecessary chances; he is content living with what's he's presented. His best fit would be in an offense with play-actions and rollouts built in—he thrives in those situations.
CONCERNS Shy about pulling the trigger deep. Short for a QB, with small hands (8⅞").
NFL COMP Brian Hoyer

MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP (HOGAN); GENE J. PUSKAR/AP (HACKENBERG)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RB

MINING THE BACKFIELDS TO FIND THIS YEAR'S *Todd Gurley* TO SHRED DEFENSES

1 EZEKIEL ELLIOTT ▼
Ohio State (6' 0", 225 lbs.)
1,821 yards / 23 TDs
What's *not* to love here? Elliott is a true three-down back, built to withstand the rigors of being a workhorse at the NFL level. He averaged a staggering 6.7 yards per carry during his college career and 7.7 per catch. There is an explosive nature to everything he does, from the way he bursts through a hole to the way he welcomes contact.
CONCERNS Heavy workload (600-plus touches over the past two years). Room for improvement as a blocker.
NFL COMP Adrian Peterson

2 DERRICK HENRY ▼
Alabama (6' 3", 247 lbs.)
2,219 yards / 28 TDs
A break-the-mold running back, the mountainous Henry ran a 4.54-second 40-yard dash at the combine, showed off a 37-inch vertical leap and broad-jumped nearly 11 feet. He almost always generates an extra push at the finish of his runs, wearing down defenses in the process. Just let him plant and get upfield—then get out of the way.
CONCERNS Won't shake many defenders in the open field. Limited usage in the passing game.
NFL COMP LeGarrette Blount

2015 FBS rushing yards leader
DERRICK HENRY, Alabama
2,219

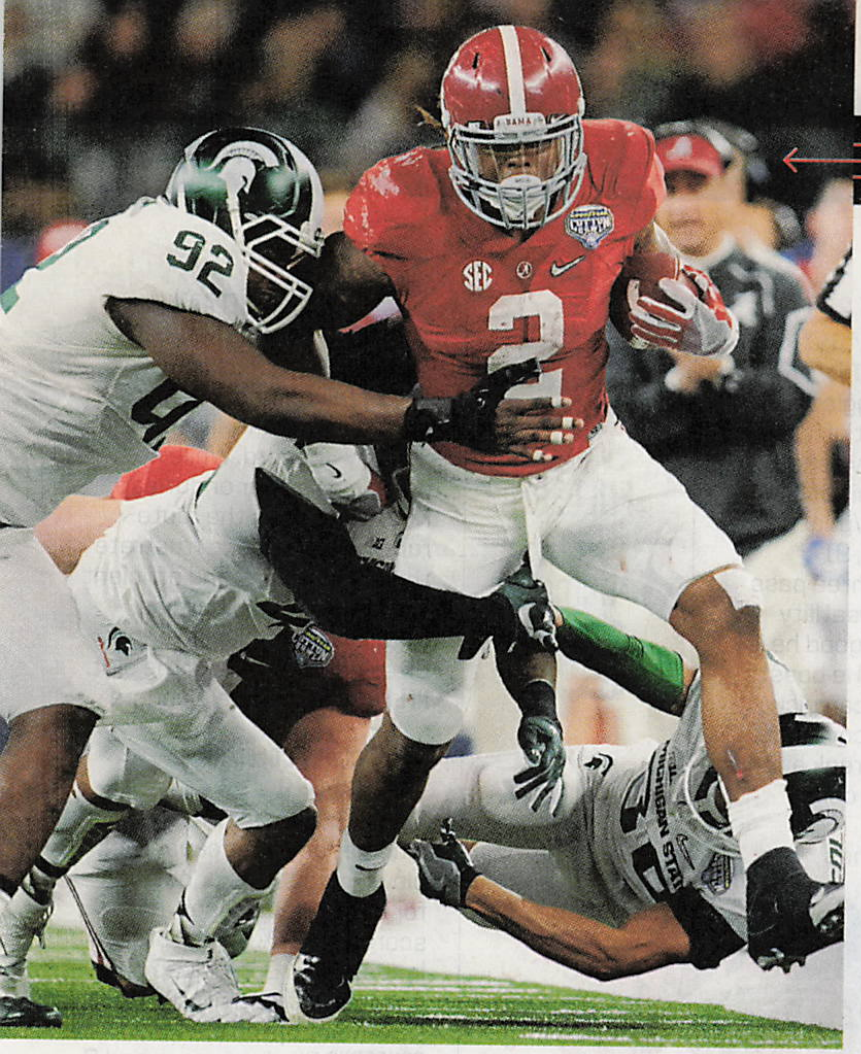
Top 40 time at combine
KEITH MARSHALL, Georgia
4.31

3 KENNETH DIXON ▼
Louisiana Tech (5' 10", 215 lbs.)
1,070 yards / 19 TDs
With his shifty feet, Dixon is an extremely dangerous playmaker outside the tackle box, either as a runner or receiver. Given the explosiveness of his upfield burst, he looks tailor-made for a zone-blocking scheme. As his 87 career TDs show, he was used in all situations.
CONCERNS Lacks size, strength between the tackles. Injuries in 2013 and '15.
NFL COMP Ameer Abdullah

4 JORDAN HOWARD ▼
Indiana (6' 0", 230 lbs.)
1,213 yards / 9 TDs
Howard's physical traits may not impress alongside some other backs', but he makes up for it with his outstanding vision. He can spot the tiniest hole along the line and exploit it with his footwork—there's little wasted motion. And still: He welcomes contact. His speed isn't great, but he can turn the corner on LBs.
CONCERNS Banged up for much of '15. Limited looks in the passing attack.
NFL COMP Lamar Miller

5 ALEX COLLINS ▼
Arkansas (5' 10", 217 lbs.)
1,577 yards / 20 TDs
Collins's gait can be a little choppy, which would be more of a problem if he weren't so often employing those quick steps to let his blocks set up in front of him. When he makes it through the line, he's very difficult to bring down. He's also a steady option as a blocker and play-action decoy.
CONCERNS Could be quicker to the hole. Never topped 100 receiving yards in a season.
NFL COMP Devonta Freeman

AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



DERRICK HENRY

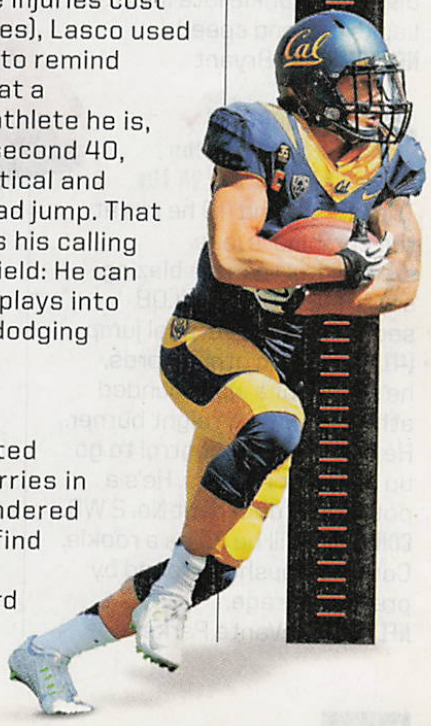
6 PAUL PERKINS ▼
UCLA (5' 10", 208 lbs.)
1,343 yards / 14 TDs
Perkins has video-game-level elusiveness in confined spaces—he can cut side-to-side in a heartbeat without sacrificing his balance. His game was well-suited to UCLA's shotgun-heavy offense, as it allowed him to move east-west after handoffs and to slip out as a receiver, where he had 80 career catches.
CONCERNS Lacks size, physicality to be a bell-cow back. Could struggle picking up blitzing NFL LBs.
NFL COMP Dion Lewis

7 DEVONTAE BOOKER ▼
Utah (5' 11", 219 lbs.)
1,261 yards / 11 TDs
He profiles like a poor man's Elliott: He can handle all the same duties as a three-down NFL back, he's just less dominant than the former Buckeye. Booker does not shy from contact, but he's at his best when he's reading a play to find his blocks. Bonus: He'll move the chains as a pass catcher and keep his QB clean as a blocker.
CONCERNS Juco transfer will be 24 in May. Left-knee injury in November required surgery.
NFL COMP Jay Ajayi

8 MARSHAUN COPRICH ▼
Illinois State (5' 8", 207 lbs.)
1,967 yards / 23 TDs
Coprich racked up more than 4,200 rushing yards over his final two seasons as a Redbird, so it's a little odd to suggest that his future could be as a pass-catching back. But because he does some of his best work on the perimeter (and doesn't mind picking up a blitzer), he very well could be a change-of-pace option.
CONCERNS Arrested last April on a marijuana charge. Hesitates too long when openings aren't obvious.
NFL COMP Branden Oliver

9 JONATHAN WILLIAMS ▼
Arkansas (5' 11", 220 lbs.)
1,190 yards / 12 TDs*
He makes a lot of defenders miss, not so much with wiggle but with burst and balance. While Williams takes some negative plays trying to shimmy his way open, once he cracks the line, he cruises through arm tackles to the second and third levels. He doesn't mind taking on contact to finish a run.
CONCERNS Sat out all of '15 with left-foot injury. Often gets impatient, misses some holes.
NFL COMP Ryan Mathews

10 DANIEL LASCO ▼
California (6' 0", 209 lbs.)
331 yards / 3 TDs
After struggling to stay healthy last season (when hip and ankle injuries cost him five games), Lasco used the combine to remind everyone what a remarkable athlete he is, with a 4.46-second 40, 41.5-inch vertical and 135-inch broad jump. That athleticism is his calling card on the field: He can turn nothing plays into big gains by dodging tackles and stepping on the gas.
CONCERNS Limited to just 65 carries in '15. Vision hindered by desire to find big plays.
NFL COMP Denard Robinson



DARREN CARROLL FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (HENRY); THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES (LASCO)

WR

GOING DEEP TO FIND THIS YEAR'S **Odell Beckham Jr.** TO SLAY SECONDARIES

1 LAQUON TREADWELL
Ole Miss (6' 2", 221 lbs.)
82 rec / 1,153 yards / 11 TDs
Treadwell is a physically imposing specimen who pushes DBs around on passes and (especially) as a run blocker. At his size, he may not create huge gaps in coverage, but he makes up for it by dominating in the air. He plays smart too, knowing where to break off his routes.
CONCERNS Broke left fibula, dislocated ankle late in 2014. Lacks top-end speed.
NFL COMP Dez Bryant

2 JOSH DOCTSON
TCU (6' 2", 202 lbs.)
79 rec / 1,327 yards / 14 TDs
The 4.5-second 40 he ran at the combine is less meaningful than his blazing short-shuttle time (4.08 seconds) or his vertical jump (41 inches). In other words, he's more of a well-rounded athlete than a straight burner. He has the body control to go up and over corners. He's a potentially dominant No. 2 WR.
CONCERNS Will be 24 as a rookie. Could get pushed around by press coverage.
NFL COMP DeVante Parker

3 TYLER BOYD
Pittsburgh (6' 1", 197 lbs.)
91 rec / 926 yards / 6 TDs
The Panthers struggled to drum up consistent offense this season, so they asked Boyd to do a little bit of everything: 19 kick/punt returns, 40 carries, 91 receptions—even three pass attempts. That versatility overshadows how good he is as a pure receiver. He boasts terrific hands and can pick apart underneath coverage.
CONCERNS Doesn't break a ton of tackles. Limited deep-threat ability.
NFL COMP Marvin Jones

Top 40 time at combine
WILL FULLER, Notre Dame
4.32

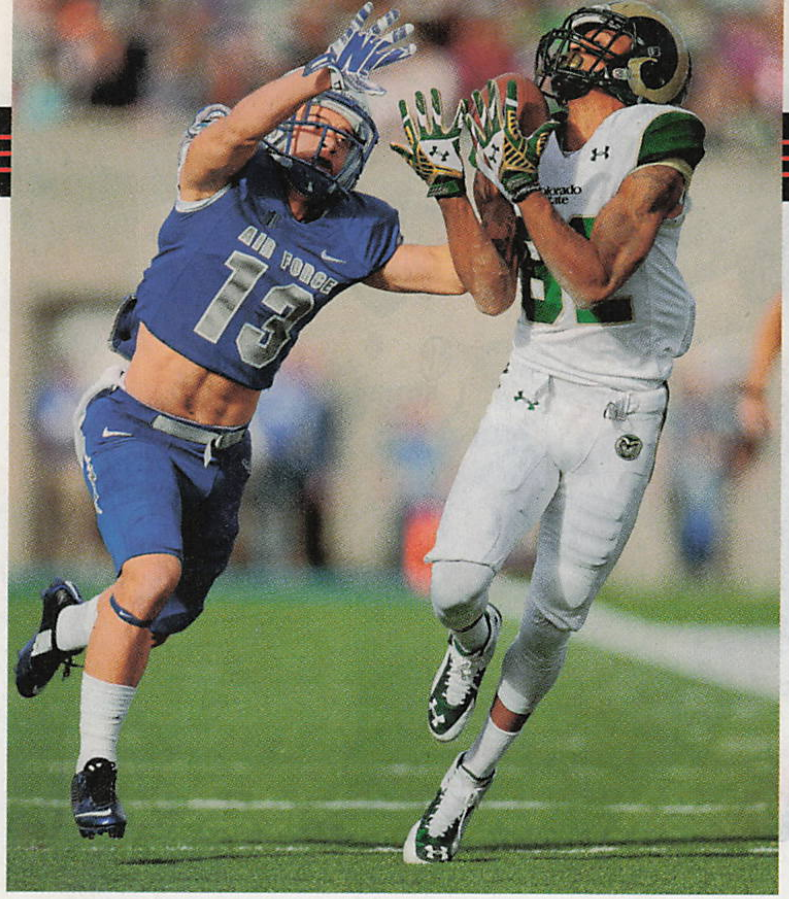
4 STERLING SHEPARD
Oklahoma (5' 10", 194 lbs.)
86 rec / 1,288 yards / 11 TDs
The receiver most likely to make a substantial impact in '16? Try Shepard. While he won't overpower or outleap NFL DBs, he has the route-running prowess to frustrate them. He is quick and efficient from the slot and outside.
CONCERNS Must play stronger. Size could land him in the slot.
NFL COMP Emmanuel Sanders

5 COREY COLEMAN
Baylor (5' 11", 194 lbs.)
74 rec / 1,363 yards / 20 TDs
A home run hitter capable of blowing past DBs or battling for contested passes, he scored on 27% of his catches last season. Don't sleep on Coleman's creativity; he's a threat out of the backfield.
CONCERNS Playing in a spread O limited his route tree.
NFL COMP T.Y. Hilton

6 MICHAEL THOMAS
Ohio State (6' 3", 212 lbs.)
56 rec / 781 yards / 9 TDs
Thomas will be more productive as a pro than he was at Ohio State, where there were too many mouths to feed. He has strong hands, he makes tacklers miss, and he keeps defenders guessing by not tipping his plans.
CONCERNS More potential than finished product.
NFL COMP Eric Decker

7 BRAXTON MILLER
Ohio State (6' 1", 201 lbs.)
26 rec / 341 yards / 3 TDs
Through limited opportunities, the former QB showed a natural ability as a WR. Miller's footwork has the effect of making him appear to be moving at twice the speed of his defenders. There's simply way too much

MICHAEL CHANG/GETTY IMAGES



JUSTIN EDMONDS/GETTY IMAGES

athleticism here to ignore.
CONCERNS Very raw. Can he work between the hashes?
NFL COMP Tavon Austin

8 WILL FULLER
Notre Dame (6' 0", 186 lbs.)
62 rec / 1,258 yards / 14 TDs
Time and again, Fuller proved he could get behind college corners. And when he did so, he made a bevy of tough clutch catches. His speed (4.32-second 40) spooks defenders into giving him an extra cushion.
CONCERNS One-trick pony right now. Too many unforced drops.
NFL COMP Ted Ginn Jr.

9 RASHARD HIGGINS
Colorado State (6' 1", 196 lbs.)
75 rec / 1,062 yards / 8 TDs
His numbers dipped in 2015 after his old QB, Garrett Grayson, headed to the NFL and his Rams coach, Jim McElwain, bolted for Florida. But Higgins's talent remains. He has an understanding for how to get open, backed by wiggle after the catch.
CONCERNS Lacks NFL physicality. Won't scare pro defenses over the top.
NFL COMP Michael Crabtree

10 MALCOLM MITCHELL
Georgia (6' 0", 198 lbs.)
58 rec / 865 yards / 5 TDs
The Mitchell we saw in '15? That might just be scratching the surface. He can fire into routes over the middle, and once he does, defenses must dedicate multiple people to him, as he's tricky to tackle.
CONCERNS Physical CBs keep him from getting into routes.
NFL COMP Robert Woods

11 PHAROH COOPER
South Carolina (5' 11", 203 lbs.)
66 rec / 973 yards / 8 TDs
So many possibilities here. Cooper not only caught a combined 135 passes over the past two seasons, he also averaged 7.2 yards per carry during his career and 22.4 yards as a freshman kick returner.
CONCERNS More puzzle piece than star. Doesn't fight through contact.
NFL COMP Stefon Diggs

12 LEONTE CARROO
Rutgers (6' 0", 211 lbs.)
39 rec / 809 yards / 10 TDs
Carroo got into a load of trouble (curfew violation; domestic violence charges, which were dropped), but when he was on the field he often dominated, setting up defenders with crisp routes and embracing contact.
CONCERNS Off-field red flags. Plays big but lacks height.
NFL COMP Pierre Garçon

13 TAJAE SHARPE
UMass (6' 2", 194 lbs.)
111 rec / 1,319 yards / 5 TDs
Sharpe puts CBs on their heels by bursting off the line, planting and breaking routes on a dime. His QBs often didn't provide him much room for receptions, and he didn't need it—Sharpe attacks the ball.
CONCERNS Small hands could push him down some boards.
NFL COMP Allen Hurns

14 AARON BURBRIDGE
Michigan State (6' 0", 206 lbs.)
85 rec / 1,258 yards / 7 TDs
At MSU, he bailed out Connor Cook a good number of times by making acrobatic grabs in traffic. He positions himself well along the sideline, finding gaps between coverage, and he has excellent hands.
CONCERNS He's a bit of an outside/slot tweener.
NFL COMP Jared Abbrederis

15 KEYARRIS GARRETT
Tulsa (6' 3", 220 lbs.)
96 rec / 1,588 yards / 8 TDs
Garrett's body fits the profile of an NFL receiver. Should he develop a complete repertoire to go along with it, he could be a draft steal. He'll be a deep threat and a red-zone option out of the gate.
CONCERNS Can he only go deep?
NFL COMP Malcom Floyd

2015 FBS receiving yards leader
KEYARRIS GARRETT, Tulsa
1,588

TE

SORTING THROUGH THE RANKS TO FIND THIS YEAR'S *Tyler Eifert* TO BAFFLE DEFENSES

1 HUNTER HENRY
Arkansas (6' 5", 250 lbs.)
51 rec / 739 yards / 3 TDs
Despite playing in a throwback offense—325-pound linemen; strong commitment to the run game—Henry showed many traits that will appeal to the modern NFL. He lined up in the slot, as a fullback and in the traditional in-line position, with the athleticism to get open from each spot. There's a solid base to work from here.
CONCERNS Tends to lunge, lose balance while blocking. Gets lost in the muck running routes in traffic.
NFL COMP Tyler Eifert

2 NICK VANNETT
Ohio State (6' 6", 257 lbs.)
19 rec / 162 yards / 0 TDs
His scouting report is similar to that of 2015 third-rounder and former Ohio State teammate Jeff Heuerman, including this: Vannett projects to be a better pro receiver than he got to show in college. Heuerman may have been a bit more solid as a blocker, but Vannett can be more dangerous as a passing-game mismatch.
CONCERNS Limited production. He isn't fooling anyone with his routes.
NFL COMP Travis Kelce

3 AUSTIN HOOPER
Stanford (6' 4", 254 lbs.)
34 rec / 438 yards / 6 TDs
Hooper plays a big game over the middle, using all of his weight to box out defenders and fight for extra yardage. He has enough speed (4.72-second 40) to be problematic for linebackers when he gets a step, too. Give him a little time and he might turn into a dominant run blocker.
CONCERNS Given his size, room to be more physical as a receiver. Just two years of college experience.
NFL COMP Dwayne Allen

4 TYLER HIGBEE
W. Kentucky (6' 6", 249 lbs.)
38 rec / 563 yards / 8 TDs
Higbee was a wide receiver when he arrived at WKU in '11, and that background shows, as both a positive and a negative. Pushing him toward the top of this TE class is the fact that he knows how to get open and is smooth finishing plays. There's no easy way to cover him man-to-man on the second or third level.
CONCERNS Blocks like a converted receiver. Missed time in '15 with a left-knee injury.
NFL COMP Ladarius Green

2015 FBS receiving yards leader
HUNTER HENRY, Arkansas
739

Top 40 time at combine
JERELL ADAMS, South Carolina
4.64

5 JERELL ADAMS
South Carolina (6' 5", 247 lbs.)
28 rec / 421 yards / 3 TDs
Adams was listed at 231 pounds by the Gamecocks, yet he weighed in significantly above that at the combine. He still ran a 4.64-second 40—best among ends—so he now boasts a scary combo of speed and size. Adams is developing as a blocker. He'll make his mark, though, as a versatile, field-stretching target.
CONCERNS Can he maintain (or add) weight? Needs creative coordinator to unlock potential.
NFL COMP Zach Miller (Bears)

STACY REVERE/GETTY IMAGES

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SORTING THROUGH THE HOGS TO FIND THE NEXT **Zack Martin** TO PAVE SOME LANES

1 LAREMY TUNSIL, T
Ole Miss (6' 5", 310 lbs.)
He's about as good as a tackle prospect gets. The footwork, hands, size—it's all there.
CONCERNS Lacks a through-the-whistle mean streak.
NFL COMP Tyron Smith

2 RONNIE STANLEY, T
Notre Dame (6' 6", 312 lbs.)
He has the footwork of a TE; he uses that in protection and releasing to the second level.
CONCERNS Strength isn't on par with his athleticism.
NFL COMP Jason Peters

3 TAYLOR DECKER, T
Ohio State (6' 7", 310 lbs.)
NFL coaches will love his edge. He's nasty in the run game, burying defensive linemen.
CONCERNS Hiccups as a pass blocker could limit him to RT.
NFL COMP Sebastian Vollmer

4 JACK CONKLIN, T
Michigan St. (6' 6", 308 lbs.)
His time at tackle in a pro-style O is invaluable, but he has the power to move inside.
CONCERNS May not be seen as quick enough to play LT.
NFL COMP Bryan Bulaga

5 JOSHUA GARNETT, G
Stanford (6' 4", 312 lbs.)
This mauler led the way for the Cardinal's ground game. He overpowers defenders.
CONCERNS Can be sloppy in pass protection.
NFL COMP Gabe Jackson

6 JASON SPRIGGS, T
Indiana (6' 6", 301 lbs.)
His athleticism is obvious. A zone-blocking team could use him on either side.
CONCERNS Raw technique compared to top four tackles.
NFL COMP Lane Johnson

7 CODY WHITEHAIR, G
Kansas State (6' 4", 301 lbs.)
Strong, smart and reliable, he'll be an early-impact guard after thriving at several spots.
CONCERNS Defenders can get their hands into his chest.
NFL COMP Joel Bitonio

8 RYAN KELLY, C
Alabama (6' 4", 311 lbs.)
He's more athletic than credited, but he gets the job done with smarts, strength.
CONCERNS Pro NTs may overpower him one-on-one.
NFL COMP Corey Linsley

9 CHRISTIAN WESTERMAN, G
Arizona State (6' 3", 298 lbs.)
He's perfect for an O that gets its guards on the move.
CONCERNS Will he hold up against powerful DTs?
NFL COMP Ali Marpet

AARON M. SPRECHER/AP

10 GERMAIN IFEDI, G
Texas A&M (6' 6", 324 lbs.)
Ifedi's built like a pro lineman, slides well and is almost impossible to run through.
CONCERNS Gets in trouble lunging for first contact.
NFL COMP Terron Armstead

11 LE'RAVEN CLARK, T
Texas Tech (6' 5", 316 lbs.)
His length (36⅛-inch arms) will sell him as a future franchise left tackle.
CONCERNS Defenders with complex rushes can lose him.
NFL COMP Jared Veldheer

12 CONNOR MCGOVERN, G
Missouri (6' 4", 306 lbs.)
Experienced at G and both T spots, his most impressive moments came on the move.
CONCERNS Can be clunky when challenged by speed rushers.
NFL COMP Trai Turner

13 JACK ALLEN, C
Michigan State (6' 1", 294 lbs.)
Allen gets an edge off the snap, then uses technique and tenacity to move defenders.
CONCERNS Undersized with short arms (32¼ inches).
NFL COMP Rodney Hudson

14 KYLE MURPHY, T
Stanford (6' 6", 305 lbs.)
His best fit may be in a man-heavy run scheme, where he can push defenders around.
CONCERNS Takes him an extra beat to get going off the snap.
NFL COMP Ricky Wagner

15 JOE DAHL, G
Washington St. (6' 4", 304 lbs.)
His nonstop motor helps him clean up teammates' mistakes in pass protection.
CONCERNS Comes from the pass-happy Air Raid offense.
NFL COMP John Greco

Top 40 time at combine
JASON SPRIGGS, T, Indiana
4.94

Top bench-press reps at combine
CHRISTIAN WESTERMAN, G, Arizona State
34

PLAYER RANKINGS DEFENSE

DL

DIGGING IN THE DIRT TO FIND THIS YEAR'S *Aaron Donald* TO MAN THE TRENCHES

1 JOEY BOSA, DE ▼
Ohio State (6' 5", 269 lbs.)
35 tackles / 5 sacks / 1 FF
Some teams will see Bosa as a 3-4 OLB—he's gone through those positional drills. But his game at OSU was more like a DT's: He plays mean, with power to overwhelm blockers. His ideal fit is at end, where he blends punch with agility.
CONCERNS Loses plays on misdirection. Surprisingly average as a run tackler.
NFL COMP Carlos Dunlap

2 DEFOREST BUCKNER, DE ▼
Oregon (6' 7", 291 lbs.)
43 tackles / 10½ sacks / 1 FR
Buckner's stature is overwhelming; you can't help but notice him when he enters a room. Not surprisingly, much of his impact comes from strong-arming blockers. He's hard to move off the edge and can bully his way into backfields.
CONCERNS More effective moving north-south than east-west. Will struggle to beat NFL tackles with speed.
NFL COMP Calais Campbell

3 A'SHAWN ROBINSON, DT ▼
Alabama (6' 4", 307 lbs.)
18 tackles / 3½ sacks / 1 FR
Robinson has the build of a five-year NFL vet and can make an immediate impact at the next level against the run. He's quicker than he showed at the combine, suggesting that he can still be a legit pass rusher.
CONCERNS Belief that he can get to the QB is mostly speculative. Poor leverage against double teams.
NFL COMP Bennie Logan

2015 FBS sacks leader
CARL NASSIB, DE, Penn State
16

4 NOAH SPENCE, DE ▼
E. Kentucky (6'2", 251 lbs.)
31 tackles / 11½ sacks / 3 FF
Had Spence's career stayed on track at OSU, we might be talking about him as a top 10 lock. Even with his well-documented drug problem, he could wind up an early round 1 choice because of his pass-rushing talent out of two- and three-point stances. He blew by tackles on the outside at the Senior Bowl.
CONCERNS Banned from Big Ten. Unlikely much help in space.
NFL COMP Justin Houston

5 VERNON BUTLER, DT ▼
Louisiana Tech (6' 4", 323 lbs.)
28 tackles / 3 sacks / 1 FR
He evokes the Broncos' Derek Wolfe because he has the muscle and agility to be a standout run stuffer as a 3-4 end—but also the Bills' Marcell Dareus because he's versatile enough to be much more. The only mystery is whether he can get to the passer.
CONCERNS Just five career sacks in college. What's his best position in the NFL?
NFL COMP Derek Wolfe

TIM WARNER/CSM/AP

MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES

6 SHAQ LAWSON, DE
Clemson (6' 3", 269 lbs.)
36 tackles / 12½ sacks / 1 FF
The ACC's 2015 sack leader also had an NCAA-best 24½ tackles for loss. Lawson is a powerful presence with a strong nose for the ball; he'll bring the most heat as a rookie against the run.
CONCERNS Initial burst can leave him caught too far upfield. Needs to expand his pass-rushing arsenal.
NFL COMP Everson Griffen

7 SHELDON RANKINS, DT
Louisville (6' 1", 299 lbs.)
28 tackles / 6 sacks / 1 FR
Despite his mass, he's capable of lining up anywhere across either a 3-4 or a 4-3, including at NT. His tremendous penetrating ability could help turn him into this year's Aaron Donald—an undersized but dominant three technique.
CONCERNS His size will cause some teams to devalue him.
NFL COMP Kawann Short

8 ANDREW BILLINGS, DT
Baylor (6' 1", 311 lbs.)
32 tackles / 5½ sacks / 1 FF
Billings is strong enough to make a living as a nosetackle in the NFL; he doesn't budge easily. And he backs his immense power with active hands.
CONCERNS Finishes too many plays on the turf. Won't be drafted to pass rush.
NFL COMP Johnathan Hankins

9 KEVIN DODD, DE
Clemson (6' 5", 277 lbs.)
44 tackles / 12 sacks / 1 FF
Using his length to his advantage on the edge, he nearly matched linemate Lawson's sack total with a late push—eight in his final five collegiate games. If he can do that as a raw prospect, how good might he be with some professional seasoning?
CONCERNS Just one year of extensive playing time.
NFL COMP Kony Ealy

10 KENNY CLARK, DT
UCLA (6' 3", 314 lbs.)
47 tackles / 6 sacks / 5 PD
Clark has excellent awareness of where the ball is, and he already has the size, power and instincts to wreak havoc against the run. He entered the '15 season in L.A. with one career sack but appears to be honing his rush game.
CONCERNS Inconsistent moving laterally at the line.
NFL COMP Brandon Mebane

11 JARRAN REED, DT
Alabama (6' 3", 307 lbs.)
17 tackles / 1 sack / 1 FR
An absolute stud against the run, Reed couples raw strength with decent agility and often proves too much to handle for one-on-one blockers. NFL teams perceive a dwindling need for two-down, two-gap run stuffers, but Reed might force coordinators to rethink that.
CONCERNS Two years, two sacks. 2014 DUI (pending).
NFL COMP Brandon Williams

12 CHRIS JONES, DT
Mississippi State (6' 6", 310 lbs.)
16 tackles / 2½ sacks / 4 PD
Jones described himself at the combine as a "defensive end playing tackle"; it'll be a challenge for an NFL coach to figure out how best to use him. With his versatility, locking him into one specific role might be a mistake.
CONCERNS Production never caught up to his potential. Technique comes and goes.
NFL COMP Stephon Tuitt

13 ROBERT NKEMDICHE, DT
Ole Miss (6' 3", 294 lbs.)
13 tackles / 3 sacks / 2 PD
The worry here is that Nkemdiche goes down a

Top 40 time at combine
CHARLES TAPPER, DE, Oklahoma
4.59

similar path as his NFL comp, Saints DT Nick Fairley, whose lack of motivation after the '11 draft impeded his development early. Both men left school with the athletic gifts to dominate as a DT or a 3-4 DE. But does Nkemdiche *want* to?
CONCERNS Suspended for bowl game (marijuana citation). Stats never matched hype.
NFL COMP Nick Fairley

14 EMMANUEL OGBAH, DE
Oklahoma State (6' 4", 273 lbs.)
45 tackles / 13 sacks / 3 FF
Ogbah wins his battles by swiping blockers' hands off his body and finishing with power. He also has the balance to take a low block and keep pursuing. But the co-Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year (along with Billings) went stretches in '15 where he was wholly ineffective.
CONCERNS Doesn't play with extreme quickness. Gets buried when blockers drive down on his outside shoulder.
NFL COMP Preston Smith

15 JONATHAN BULLARD, DT
Florida (6' 3", 285 lbs.)
39 tackles / 6½ sacks / 2 PD
A shot-out-of-a-cannon defender, Bullard thrives by beating opponents off the snap. He doesn't mind mixing it up, and in the pros that could earn him reps on the edge against the run.
CONCERNS Undersized by three-technique standards. Susceptible to misdirection.
NFL COMP Antonio Smith

LB

PATROLLING THE MIDDLE TO FIND THIS YEAR'S ***Khalil Mack*** TO GOBBLE UP RUNNERS

1 MYLES JACK, OLB
UCLA (6' 1", 245 lbs.)
9 tackles / 0 sacks / 0 FF
Jack hasn't played a game since Sept. 19, 2015, and his recovery from a right-meniscus tear was slower than expected. When he's healthy, though, he's right there with Jalen Ramsey as the most dynamic defender in this draft. He can tackle, defend the run, cover the slot—an All-Pro in the making.
CONCERNS Occasionally gets stuck in traffic.
NFL COMP Sean Lee

2 REGGIE RAGLAND, ILB
Alabama (6' 1", 247 lbs.)
60 tackles / 2½ sacks / 2 FF
SEC Defensive Player of the Year on a team that won the national title—if those accolades don't move the needle, nothing will. Ragland steps down and buries RBs, but he does it with discipline, finding holes and fighting through traffic. His potential in pass D is undersold.
CONCERNS Weight fluctuates. Has to show he can cover NFL RBs, TEs.
NFL COMP Dont'a Hightower

3 DARRON LEE, OLB
Ohio State (6' 1", 232 lbs.)
36 tackles / 4½ sacks / 2 FF
Lee falls on the opposite end of the spectrum from Ragland: Whereas Ragland is a big, heavy presence for early downs, Lee's rangy game will appeal to teams shy on LB speed. He can cover, including against receivers, and he can go sideline to sideline. Given time to mature, he has a chance to be great.
CONCERNS Fails to finish plays reliably. Still finding a feel for angles to the ball.
NFL COMP Mychal Kendricks

4 LEONARD FLOYD, OLB
Georgia (6' 6", 244 lbs.)
37 tackles / 4½ sacks / 3 PD
NFL teams are still trying to figure out what to do with Floyd. The tall, lanky LB tested tackles with his quickness—both in his feet and hands. But he might have to live off-ball, where his length and athleticism would stay clear of bulldozing blockers.
CONCERNS Too thin to be an NFL edge rusher? Given his play against the run, he may be stuck in sub packages.
NFL COMP Anthony Barr

5 JAYLON SMITH, OLB
Notre Dame (6' 2", 223 lbs.)
69 tackles / 1 sack / 1 FF
A brutal ACL/MCL tear of his left knee in his final college game leaves Smith in limbo as the draft approaches. At 100%, he's right there with Jack as a playmaker—but when will he be all the way back? Assuming he ever is, Smith's agility could make him a gem as a multidimensional threat for any scheme.
CONCERNS Likely to spend all of '16 on IR. Hesitates after the snap while making reads.
NFL COMP Bobby Wagner

SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

RICH KANE/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP

6 SU'A CRAVENS, OLB
USC (6' 1", 226 lbs.)
46 tackles / 5½ sacks / 2 FF
Viewed as a linebacker-safety hybrid, Cravens finished his USC career as far more backer than safety. His coverage background is a definite plus.
CONCERNS Undersized. Disappointing workouts.
NFL COMP Shaq Thompson

7 KYLER FACKRELL, OLB
Utah State (6' 5", 245 lbs.)
37 tackles / 4 sacks / 2 FF
He's an obvious fit as a pass rusher, but he also motors after RBs and anticipates routes in coverage. That three-down range is what draws the NFL player comp.
CONCERNS Torn right ACL early in '14. Will be 25 in rookie year.
NFL COMP Kyle Van Noy

8 DEION JONES, OLB
LSU (6' 1", 222 lbs.)
57 tackles / 5 sacks / 1 FF
In one of the most impressive Senior Bowl weeks, he showed off freakish athleticism, sticking his nose into the pile.
CONCERNS If a blocker catches him, he can be overwhelmed.
NFL COMP Kwon Alexander

9 BLAKE MARTINEZ, ILB
Stanford (6' 2", 237 lbs.)
75 tackles / 1½ sacks / 1 FF
An old-school LB, Martinez was a vacuum on Stanford's second level, cleaning up play after play to the tune of 10 tackles per game in '15.
CONCERNS NFL speed will give him trouble in space.
NFL COMP Preston Brown

10 JORDAN JENKINS, OLB
Georgia (6' 3", 259 lbs.)
28 tackles / 4 sacks / 2 FF
Jenkins is the anchor type of LB who can free up more explosive rushers. He stands his ground, but he can also plow through blockers or bend the edge to make plays.
CONCERNS Not to be counted on in pass coverage.
NFL COMP Courtney Upshaw

11 JOE SCHOBERT, OLB
Wisconsin (6' 1", 244 lbs.)
39 tackles / 9½ sacks / 5 FF
He's underrated because he's a better football player than he is an athlete; that's how you slip to later rounds.
CONCERNS Lack of strength is problematic.
NFL COMP Danny Trevathan

12 KENTRELL BROTHERS, OLB
Missouri (6' 0", 245 lbs.)
73 tackles / 2½ sacks / 1 FF
Take Schobert's scouting report, subtract the pass rushing, add muscle, and you've got Brothers. He almost never misses a tackle or hesitates in the hole.
CONCERNS Unless a play is extended, won't pressure QB.
NFL COMP Chris Borland

13 JOSHUA PERRY, ILB
Ohio State (6' 4", 254 lbs.)
53 tackles / 3½ sacks / 4 PD
Well-built, with fierce intensity, Perry fights hard to get off blocks—he can free himself, recalibrate and finish on a ballcarrier.
CONCERNS Another LB with questionable coverage skills.
NFL COMP David Harris

2015 FBS tackles leader
ELANDON ROBERTS, LB, HOUSTON
88

Top 40 time at combine
DARRON LEE, OLB, OHIO STATE
4.47

14 ANTONIO MORRISON, ILB
Florida (6' 1", 232 lbs.)
42 tackles / 2½ sacks / 1 FF
Morrison's pro day numbers (5.1-second 40, 4.64 short shuttle) were rather lethargic, but he plays faster than that. Also know that he made it back in six months following a left-knee injury that usually takes 10–12 months to heal.
CONCERNS Arrested in '13 for barking at police dog (charges dropped).
NFL COMP Brandon Marshall

15 TRAVIS FEENEY, OLB
Washington (6' 4", 230 lbs.)
40 tackles / 8 sacks / 3 FF
A free-flowing 'backer who racked up tackles for the Huskies, Feeney tracks the ball well in space and finishes on plays. His background as a former safety gives him an advanced starting point in coverage.
CONCERNS Not overly physical; gets locked up by blockers.
NFL COMP Emmanuel Lamur

DB

LOOKING DOWNFIELD TO FIND THE NEXT ***Marcus Peters*** TO BLANKET WIDEOUTS

1 JALEN RAMSEY, CB
Florida State (6' 1", 209 lbs.)
37 tackles / 0 INTs / 10 PD
Ramsey's NFL-listed position is cornerback, but his comp—physically and skills-wise—is one of the league's top safeties. For a likely top five pick, there's a surprising amount of mystery regarding his actual pro position. He fits at either spot because of his size, awareness and breathtaking athleticism.
CONCERNS Press technique has to be more consistent.
NFL COMP Eric Berry

2 VERNON HARGREAVES III, CB
Florida (5' 10", 204 lbs.)
23 tackles / 4 INTs / 4 PD
Hips down, there probably isn't a better DB in this draft. Hargreaves shows quick feet mirroring receivers, and he has the fluid hips to change direction in a heartbeat. He supports the run and challenges the ball in the air. Oh, and check those combine numbers: 39-inch vertical; 130-inch broad jump.
CONCERNS Gets caught peeking and gives up big plays.
NFL COMP Chris Harris Jr.

3 MACKENSIE ALEXANDER, CB
Clemson (5' 10", 190 lbs.)
18 tackles / 0 INTs / 5 PD
Alexander is raw and lacks experience (he turned pro after his redshirt sophomore season), but he eventually could be the best CB in this class. He can guess which routes are coming—and doesn't shy from a tackle.
CONCERNS A lockdown CB with *zero* INTs in college?
NFL COMP Brandon Flowers

4 WILLIAM JACKSON III, CB
Houston (6' 0", 189 lbs.)
34 tackles / 5 INTs / 23 PD
Most NFL teams dream of a 6-foot CB who can run the 40 under 4.4. Jackson (4.37) is smart in coverage and does a terrific job finding the ball. He needs seasoning, but the base skill set is there.
CONCERNS Tackling is an issue.
NFL COMP Johnathan Joseph

5 DARIAN THOMPSON, S
Boise State (6' 2", 208 lbs.)
37 tackles / 5 INTs / 4 PD
Thompson's 19 career INTs hint at a centerfielder-type safety, but he deserves round 1 consideration because he's an all-around defender. His eager approach closer to the line could turn him into a box safety.
CONCERNS Questionable that he can cover WRs man-to-man.
NFL COMP Dwight Lowery

6 ELI APPLE, CB
Ohio State (6' 1", 199 lbs.)
23 tackles / 1 INT / 8 PD
Teams trying to replicate the Seahawks defensively need CBs like Apple. He's big, long and nasty outside, knocking WRs off their routes and battling for the ball.
CONCERNS Very grabby, so there will be penalties.
NFL COMP Byron Maxwell

CHRISTOPHER MAST/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP

MARK WALLHEISER/AP

7 KARL JOSEPH, S
West Virginia (5' 10", 205 lbs.)
15 tackles / 5 INTs / 1 PD
There are risks in Joseph's devil-may-care game—penalties and injuries, to name two. But there's also a clear benefit to having a big hitter who makes WRs think twice about going over the middle.
CONCERNS Torn right ACL in '15; played just four games.
NFL COMP Donte Whitner

8 JALEN MILLS, FS
LSU (6' 0", 191 lbs.)
25 tackles / 0 INTs / 3 PD
Mills may not be the NFL's next great DB, but he has value at several spots. He saw time at both CB and safety—at the former he's at his best in zone; at the latter, he has the size to play in the box.
CONCERNS Charged in '14 with second-degree battery (dismissed).
NFL COMP Kyle Arrington

9 JEREMY CASH, SS
Duke (6' 0", 212 lbs.)
57 tackles / 0 INTs / 4 PD
There's no doubt Cash can play a LB-like game in the box. But he's also better than advertised in pass coverage, especially when he can use his strength against a TE.
CONCERNS Broken right wrist required surgery in December.
NFL COMP Michael Mitchell

10 KENDALL FULLER, CB
Virginia Tech (5' 11", 187 lbs.)
3 tackles / 0 INTs / 1 PD
Fuller fits the mold of his comp, Alterraun Verner, when Verner hit free agency in '14: superior ball skills; acumen for jumping routes; suspect in run defense and man coverage.
CONCERNS Right-knee injury limited '15 to three games.
NFL COMP Alterraun Verner

11 VONN BELL, FS
Ohio State (5' 11", 199 lbs.)
43 tackles / 2 INTs / 9 PD
NFL draftniks search high and low for potential, and in doing so they can overlook able contributors like Bell, an important piece on Urban Meyer's defense for three seasons. He hits his mark on most plays and provides a presence in pass coverage thanks to his ability to get an early read on plays.
CONCERNS May be hard to trust in a last-line-of-defense role.
NFL COMP Kurt Coleman

12 DEANDRE HOUSTON-CARSON, FS
William & Mary (6' 1", 201 lbs.)
65 tackles / 4 INTs / 3 PD
Had Houston-Carson stayed at CB, which he played in '14, he might be a top 50 pick—he was that impressive there. Safety provided a better look at his playmaking; he attacked downhill more often and got more involved snap to snap.
CONCERNS Takes poor angles to the ball from his safety spot.
NFL COMP Adrian Amos

13 KEANU NEAL, SS
Florida (6' 0", 211 lbs.)
51 tackles / 1 INT / 1 PD
Think of Neal as Karl Joseph light. He brings the same mentality—he wants to clobber anyone with the ball—and his best plays come when a clear path allows him to explode into a tackle.
CONCERNS Reckless abandon can lead to brutal angles.
NFL COMP Calvin Pryor

14 ARTIE BURNS, CB
Miami (6' 0", 193 lbs.)
26 tackles / 6 INTs / 5 PD
You know those movie montages where a superhero tries to learn how to harness some newfound ability? Burns is at that point of his career. His fate depends on how well he's coached.
CONCERNS Reliant on contact that NFL officials won't allow.
NFL COMP Davon House

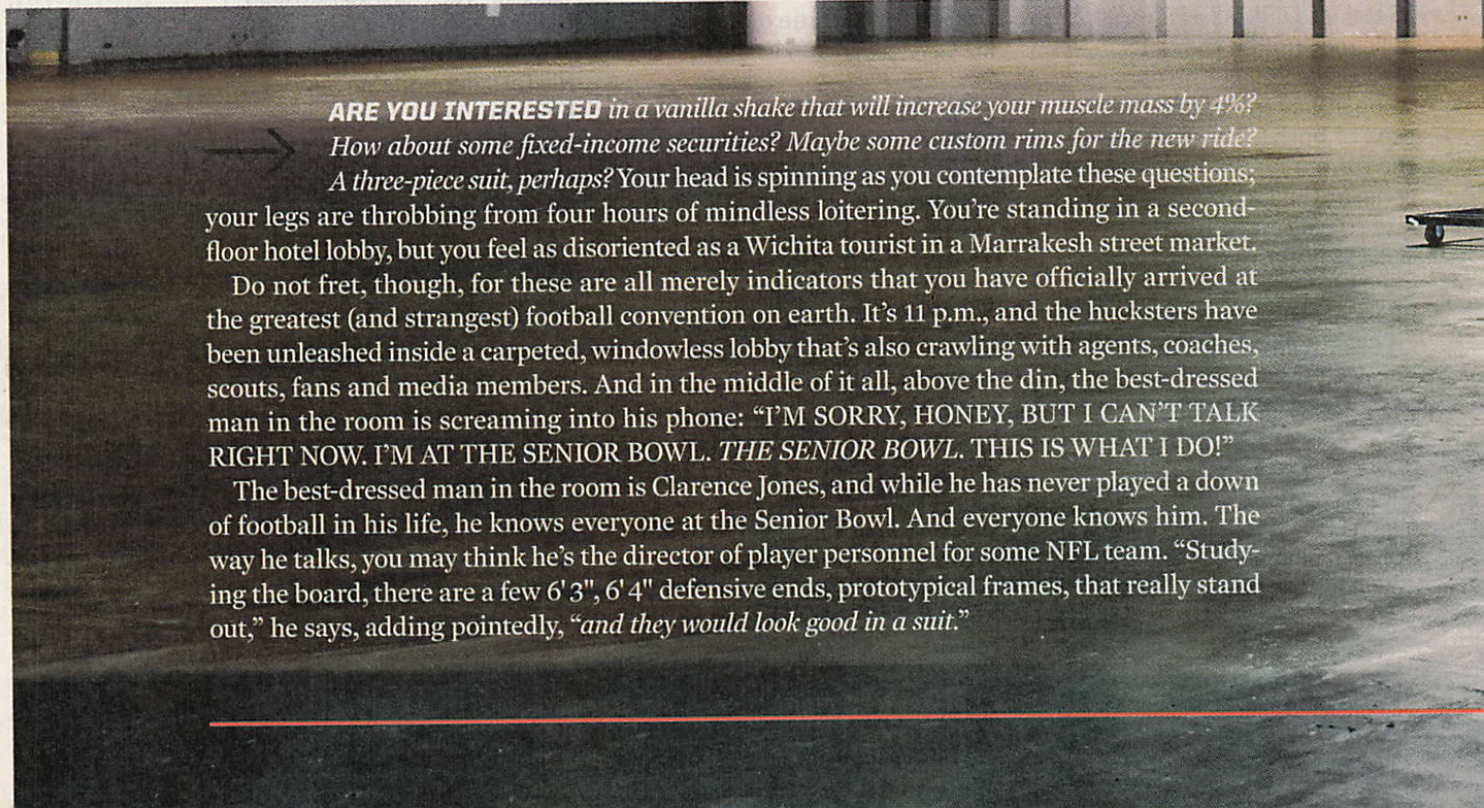
15 XAVIEN HOWARD, CB
Baylor (6' 0", 201 lbs.)
37 tackles / 5 INTs / 10 PD
Howard's best moments come when he's within striking distance of a pass thrown into a tight window. He crowds WRs and is aggressive in high-pointing the ball.
CONCERNS He's a PI penalty waiting to happen.
NFL COMP Brandon Browner

2015 FBS pick-six leader
BRYSON ABRAHAM, CB, LA. TECH
3

Top 40 time at combine
JONATHAN JONES, CB, AUBURN
4.33

LET'S GET FREAKY

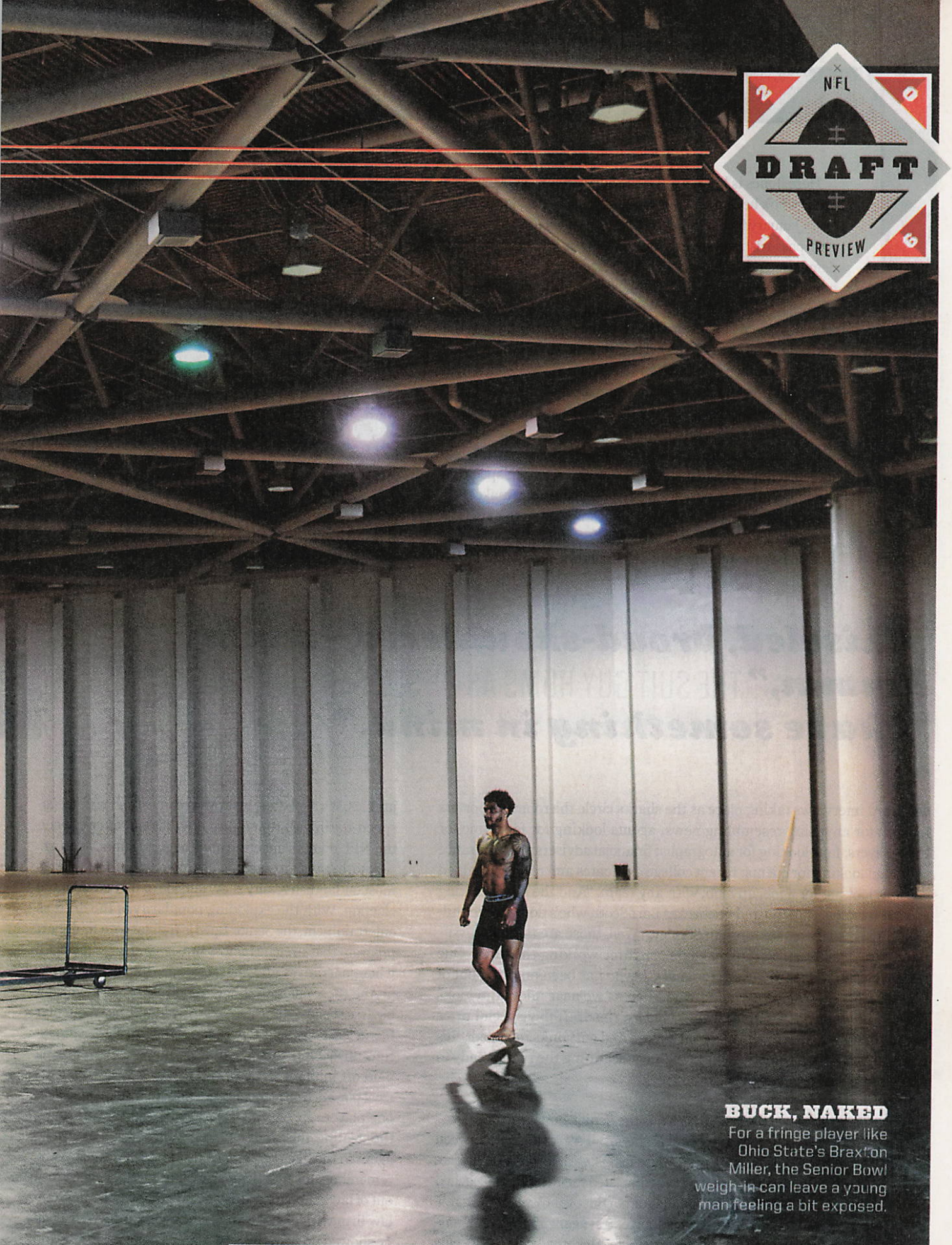
LONG BEFORE THE DRAFT AND THE COMBINE, COACHES, EXECS AND HUCKSTERS GET THEIR FIRST CRACK AT NEW NFL MEAT AT ***the five-day football carnival that is the Senior Bowl***



ARE YOU INTERESTED *in a vanilla shake that will increase your muscle mass by 4%? How about some fixed-income securities? Maybe some custom rims for the new ride? A three-piece suit, perhaps?* Your head is spinning as you contemplate these questions; your legs are throbbing from four hours of mindless loitering. You're standing in a second-floor hotel lobby, but you feel as disoriented as a Wichita tourist in a Marrakesh street market.

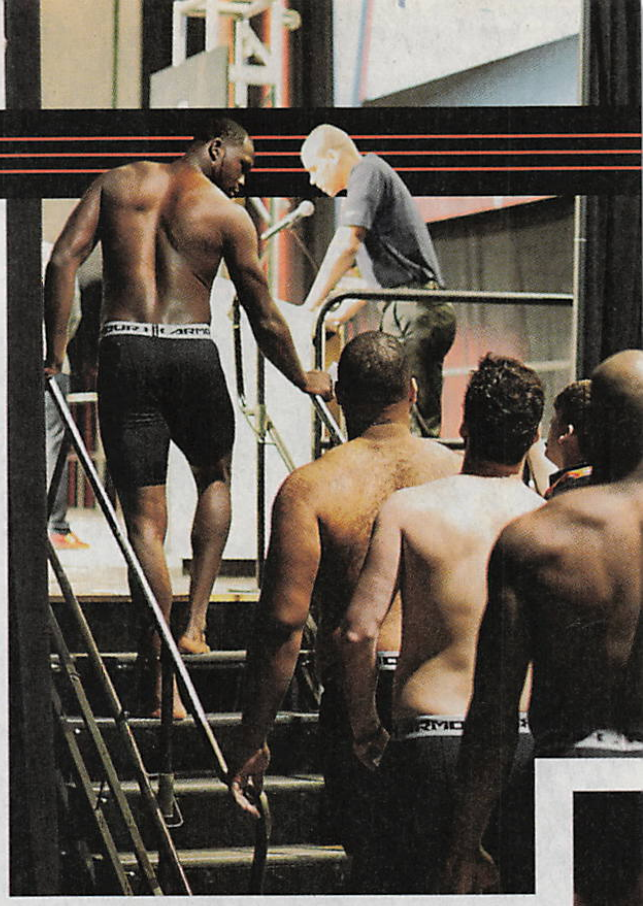
Do not fret, though, for these are all merely indicators that you have officially arrived at the greatest (and strangest) football convention on earth. It's 11 p.m., and the hucksters have been unleashed inside a carpeted, windowless lobby that's also crawling with agents, coaches, scouts, fans and media members. And in the middle of it all, above the din, the best-dressed man in the room is screaming into his phone: "I'M SORRY, HONEY, BUT I CAN'T TALK RIGHT NOW. I'M AT THE SENIOR BOWL. *THE SENIOR BOWL.* THIS IS WHAT I DO!"

The best-dressed man in the room is Clarence Jones, and while he has never played a down of football in his life, he knows everyone at the Senior Bowl. And everyone knows him. The way he talks, you may think he's the director of player personnel for some NFL team. "Studying the board, there are a few 6'3", 6'4" defensive ends, prototypical frames, that really stand out," he says, adding pointedly, "*and they would look good in a suit.*"



BUCK, NAKED
For a fringe player like Ohio State's Braxton Miller, the Senior Bowl weigh-in can leave a young man feeling a bit exposed.

BY ALBERT CHEN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN D. LILES FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



Here, Jones is known as CJ the Suit Guy—he's a Memphis tailor who's been making the 400-mile drive to Mobile, Ala., every January for the last decade. It turns out it's not just teams with pass-rushing issues who are sizing up Eastern Kentucky defensive end Noah Spence. "Chiseled, broad-shouldered—*mmm hmmm*," Jones hums. "I have something in mind."

The five-day affair in Mobile encompasses open practices, media sessions, fan events and a game on Saturday, but the real action at the Senior Bowl is inside the second-floor lobby at the downtown Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel, which at this hour resembles the *Star Wars* cantina, everyone in the shadowy club looking to cut a deal. (OH: "If I'm right, there could be like half-a-mill coming in, all cash.") Another onlooker calls the scene "a cesspool"—and that's an agent talking.

People huddle in all corners of the room, often speaking quietly so as not to be overheard, though little of it makes any sense anyway—certainly not the questions that Alabama QB Jake Coker is being asked. ("And what does your grandmother do?") That one-on-one, with an NFL scout, is among a dozen

"Chiseled, broad-shouldered—mmm hmmm," THE SUIT GUY HUMS AS HE SIZES UP ONE PROSPECT. **"I have something in mind."**

awkward interviews taking place as the sharks circle the room—reporters looking for anything resembling news; agents looking for face time for their players; fans looking for autographs; financial advisers and insurance salesmen looking for clients; recent college graduates and recently canned coaches looking for a job, any job, with any team. "And the guys walking around in suits?" says retired linebacker Bart Scott, who's doing some shilling himself, on behalf of Morgan Stanley. "Well, those are the suit guys."

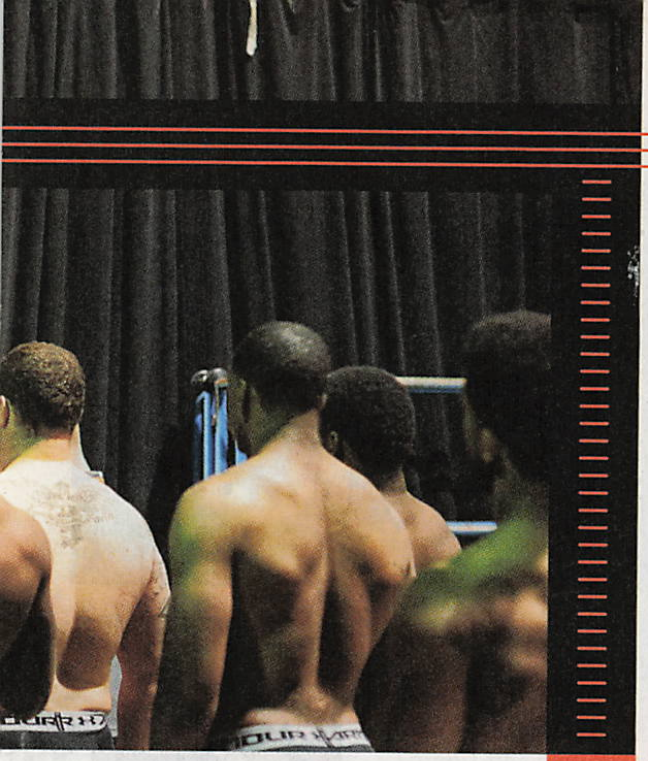
Ah, yes. The suit guys. Tonight there are three working the room. One from New York, one from Atlanta—and CJ, who has been tailoring out of his one-man shop since 1994 and who, even as we near midnight, looks like a million bucks. Or at least 1,250 bucks, the draft-day-special price for one of his suits, with shirt, pocket square and cuff links included. "It's going to be a very productive week," he says, scanning the room, ready to make some deals. "A very, very good week."

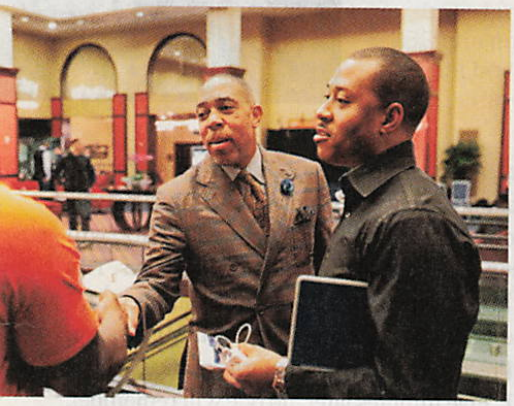
WHAT, EXACTLY, *is* the Senior Bowl in 2016?

At its core it remains an all-star exhibition between the North and South teams, with rosters of collegiate players who have completed their eligibility, coached by NFL staffs. (This year: Cowboys and Jaguars.) But over 67 years the game has become the launch point for a weeklong extravaganza in which a narrow four-block stretch of the third-largest city in Alabama hosts 1,000-plus attendees for a football assembly unlike any other. It's Comic-Con for football junkies; it's a job fair, insurance convention and mega-speed-dating all rolled into one; it's a cross between the NFL owners' meeting and the Apalachin Meeting.

Another way to see it is as Episode 1 of the world's most outlandish reality show outside of this presidential election. With the exploding popularity of the draft as entertainment, the Senior Bowl is the start of a multipart program that stretches across three months. It's the place where narratives and characters are first established.

And those characters have produced some downright bizarre scenes over the years. Any longtime frequenter has at least one Senior Bowl story that involves a prostitute, an agent throwing punches, maybe a player being paid off in plain sight—or all three. "I've seen agents steal players from other agents right in front of me," says one player rep. (Asked if he'd ever been the one doing the stealing, the agent replies, "Well, sure.") Pat Dye Jr., agent to the likes of Geno Atkins and DeMarcus Ware, remembers his first Senior Bowl, in 1988: He was fresh out of law school, working at a prestigious Birmingham law firm with designs on becoming a sports rep, when he showed up in Mobile. Dye put on a pinstripe suit and his nicest pair of shoes—and quickly realized he'd have





MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Fresh from the weigh-in, where they're publicly picked apart, prospects get pitched by the likes of CJ (left, center), who'll measure chest, arm and neck lines—albeit more discreetly than the NFL reps.

been better off wearing a holster and spurs. It felt, he says, "like the wild wild West." Dye recalls seeing a well-known agent enjoying a game of checkers right in the middle of the lobby, surrounded by shady characters. "I almost walked out and drove right back home," he swears. Instead he stuck around, learned to work the crowd and pitched his first two clients in his hotel room.

These days the Renaissance lacks that sort of Bada Bing! shadiness—and not just because of the giant peanut-butter-cup mascot wandering around. (Reese's is an official sponsor.) Today's prospects lock into agents practically the moment they conclude their college seasons, so the fistfights between agents over clients at the hotel breakfast buffet are no longer an annual ritual.

Senior Bowl director Phil Savage, a former NFL exec who took over in Mobile in 2012, has been gussying up the event, establishing it as the "third crown jewel in the draft season" (along with the combine and draft day). And he has been largely successful. The goal in Mobile, whether you're an insurance salesman or a Morgan Stanley rep or a suit guy, is to lock up prospects early as they transform from poor college students to millionaire pros; wait until the combine and you're too late. Thus the circus feels bigger and more bloated than ever. Just about anyone, it seems, can snag an invite to the free-for-all. There's a joke among event staffers: *You have to feel terrible for the six people in Mobile who didn't get a credential.*

And yet one Senior Bowl tradition remains unchanged. For the young men embarking on America's most drawn-out and degrading job interview, the process begins with a figurative dropping of one's drawers. Tuesday's weigh-in marks the official Senior Bowl kickoff and takes place inside a massive darkened hall at the Mobile Convention Center, a short walk from the Renaissance lobby. Bleachers fill with NFL types, reporters and bowl officials, everyone urgently jotting down observations of calves, traps, pecs and abs.

Altogether, it has the odd feeling of both a livestock sale and a Victoria's Secret fashion show, with uncomfortable hints of an 1800s slave auction. Players cross a Broadway-sized stage one-by-one wearing only black skivvies, get measured and weighed, and a man at the podium announces their vitals. There's a strange solemnity to the proceedings; the only one in the room who seems to have the proper perspective is Kansas State fullback Glenn Gronkowski, who walks the stage with an *Are you kidding me?* smirk. Shawn Oakman, the behemoth Baylor D-end with a CGI body straight out of the movie *300*, draws an audible reaction from the audience—but not for the right reasons. He's checked in 1½ inches short of the 6' 9" he was listed at all season. The event has its first Body-ghazi.

A few minutes after his own stroll, Stanford QB Kevin Hogan emerges, dazed, as if he's just had an invasive medical procedure. "That was . . . one of the weirdest experiences of my life," he says. "It's pretty unnecessary. I guess it's fun for . . . *them*?"

Asked to describe the scene in the holding area before their big moment, most players say they were too busy chugging bottles of water to engage in conversation. "For hydration, of course—not to gain weight," East Carolina tight end Bryce Williams clarifies with a wink. After all, every little variation from a player's media-guide height or weight raises eyebrows, which is why this portion of the Senior Bowl has occasionally produced some actual news. In 2006, Alabama-Birmingham QB Darrell Hackney measured at 5' 11", two inches shorter than his listed height, and saw his draft dreams shattered before he could even pull his pants back on. (Hackney went undrafted.)

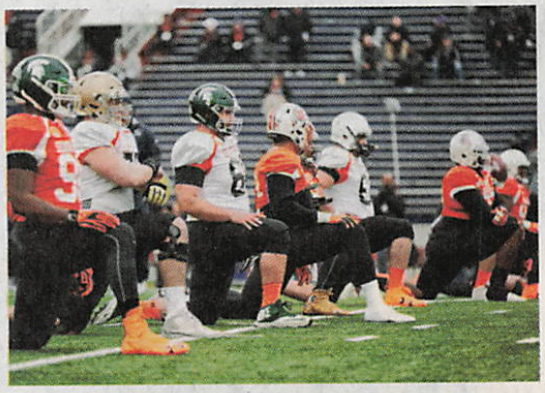
This year's crop came as prepared as possible, which is why if you peeked backstage, you could see prospects, having made their formal introduction to the NFL world, rushing off toward the hallway—not because they were late for a meeting. "After all that water," explains Utah State linebacker Kyler Fackrell, "everyone's running to go pee!"

IF YOU WANT to work on your tan, go to the Hula Bowl, agents used to tell their players. If you want to be worked, harassed and possibly humiliated, go to the Senior Bowl. Boil it down, though, and the Senior Bowl is one of the few—maybe the *only*—all-star events in sports that actually matter. Here, players actually put on pads for an entire week. Starting on Tuesday, they hit the bejesus out of one another while evaluators stand close enough to see specks of blood on jerseys.

Everyone agrees: These daily practices are far more important than the Senior Bowl itself. Fortunes rise and fall during the two-hour sessions. When Von Miller showed up in Mobile five years ago, he was an undersized Texas A&M pass rusher without a clear position. And after a week of running guys over in practice? He left town regarded as the best 'backer available and the No. 2-pick-to-be.

For these practices the second-floor-lobby scene relocates to a college field, and here the collision of worlds is even more pronounced. Sure, you'll find scouts stalking the sidelines, doing actual work, whispering into tiny digital recorders as they move from drill to drill. But mostly the scene is one epic football mosh pit. Bloggers . . . coaches from every league, from high school to the CFL . . . local businessmen . . . and some of the biggest titans of the industry, from Cowboys owner Jerry Jones to Hall of Famer Dan Marino. At one midweek practice Steelers coach Mike Tomlin gnaws on a toothpick while a few feet away Clemson coach Dabo Swinney rubs shoulders with corporate bigwigs, still high from his team's recent championship-game appearance. ("All of South Carolina, the entire state, is pulling for us now. . . .") Then a hush washes over the crowd, and with the glow of camera lights and an armada of state troopers emerging from over a hill, it feels like the arrival of a state dignitary. Only it's much bigger than that. *Nick Saban is here.*

"Les was going to come today," says one event exec of Saban's SEC pal Les Miles, "but I told him, 'No, no, you wouldn't want to do that. The Saban convention will be in town.' " And here we have confirmation: Anyone who's anyone in the football world is in Mobile this week.



SENIOR MOMENTS
Lions and Tigers and Bears—and Spartans and SEC celebs and media members. . . .

EVERYONE HERE has a story to sell," says Joby Branion, agent to, among others, Miller, Cordarelle Patterson and one of this year's top incoming linebackers, Alabama's Reggie Ragland. Branion's right. Everyone at the Senior Bowl is peddling something—Muscle Milk, life insurance, mutual funds, sneakers, hats, custom shirts. But it's easy to lose sight of who has the most important hustling to do: the players themselves. The weigh-in and the practices are part of their showcase, but just as much of their selling takes place back on the second-floor lobby, where over the week a player will sit for dozens of interviews, fill out 300-question surveys ("Would you rather be a cat or dog? Is the sky blue?" reports Fackrell) and meet with countless media talking heads on radio row. Meanwhile, NFL scouts and execs lurk everywhere, watching how they handle every situation, whether it's an interview request from an aggressive fan or, say, that table in the middle of the lobby that's stacked high with Krispy Kreme doughnuts. "He's been showing good agility out there," one scout says of a player walking through the room, and for a second you might think he's sizing up this prospect's ability to navigate the floor between the escalator and elevator.

"It's not a fun experience," says Branion, "but it's a great teachable moment. You see it all—it's a microcosm of the world they're being thrown into. Everyone is here to see what they can do to leverage you. I tell [my clients]: Take business cards, but don't give your phone number out. Be nice if you want, but realize most of them are trolling. It's a taste of the dog-eat-dog world out there. And they need that sooner or later."

By Friday much of the circus will have left town, evaluators and execs departing by the carload once practice ends. The game is always an afterthought, and this year's will be even more forgettable than usual. The week's most scrutinized player, North Dakota State quarterback Carson Wentz, will barely loosen his arm, leading just two drives. His North will lose to the South 27–16 in front of 35,271 onlookers at Ladd-Peebles Stadium. And Mississippi State's Dak Prescott, for his 7-of-10 performance, will be named MVP. Five minutes later, no one will remember.

For some, though, even in those last few hours, there is still be work to be done, especially for the best-dressed man in the room. It has been a very, very good week for Clarence Jones, who locked up two prospects. But Mobile is just the start. CJ will follow the circus to Indianapolis, then onward to the draft, in Chicago.

One night late in the week, however, the Suit Guy looks exhausted. "This has been a tough day," CJ says. He lost his father last year—he was out on the road, delivering clothes to the Timberwolves' Andrew Wiggins, when he got the news that 97-year-old Clarence Jones Sr. had died. "I'm from Chicago, and the hardest thing will be going to the draft without him. I was going to get him dressed. It will feel so strange not to have him there.

"If you do a job, do it to the best of your ability, my dad always told me. So being at the Senior Bowl today, it gave me motivation to get out of bed this morning."

CJ says this with a smile as he scans a room that is impossibly bright and, even as the hour nears midnight, bustling with activity. Depending on where you stand, it's either the apocalypse or the most beautiful sight imaginable. "It's my birthday tomorrow," he goes on. "When I wake up, I'll be 50 years old, and I'll be in Mobile, Alabama. At the Senior Bowl. And I wouldn't rather be anywhere else." □

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MOCK Round 1 DRAFT

1 TITANS
LAREMY TUNSIL
TACKLE
OLE MISS

Might a QB-needy team try to jump Cleveland for this spot? Sure. If not, Tennessee nabs Marcus Mariota's new blind-side protector.

2 BROWNS
CARSON WENTZ
QUARTERBACK
N. DAKOTA STATE

The rare position for which teams grade up for need. Can the high-upside, high-character Wentz break Cleveland's QB curse?

3 CHARGERS
JALEN RAMSEY
CORNER/SAFETY
FLORIDA STATE

With San Diego fortified at CB through free agency, the versatile Ramsey can float back to a safety role—arguably his best spot.

4 COWBOYS
MYLES JACK
OUTSIDE LB
UCLA

Joey Bosa? Ezekiel Elliott? Either Buckeye would help Dallas, but a healthy Jack could be this draft's best defender, period.

5 JAGUARS
JOEY BOSA
DEFENSIVE END
OHIO STATE

Count on the Jags to float this pick—they're more than one player away. But if Bosa is free, they'll pair him with Dante Fowler on the edge.

6 RAVENS
DEFOREST BUCKNER
DEFENSIVE END
OREGON

This franchise doesn't often find itself in the top 10; Baltimore may as well take advantage with a potential All-Pro up front.

7 49ERS
JARED GOFF
QUARTERBACK
CALIFORNIA

Goff's ability to get the ball out fast and to make plays while sliding the pocket make him an ideal fit for new coach Chip Kelly's attack.

8 EAGLES
EZEKIEL ELLIOTT
FROM DOLPHINS
RUNNING BACK
OHIO STATE

Philly moved from 13 to eight with a pick in mind. It makes sense for that to be the dynamic Elliott, a true three-down back.

17 FALCONS
LEONARD FLOYD
OUTSIDE LB
GEORGIA

Atlanta desperately needs more athleticism at linebacker. Whether Floyd is an edge rusher or a project inside, he fits the bill nicely.

18 COLTS
JACK CONKLIN
TACKLE
MICHIGAN STATE

We know Conklin can play tackle. He might also be a stellar NFL guard. That flexibility plus high-end talent is why Indy nabs him.

19 BILLS
ANDREW BILLINGS
DEF. TACKLE
BAYLOR

Buffalo has options among movable D-lineman. In Billings, Rex Ryan gets an inside force to free up DT Marcell Dareus.

20 JETS
NOAH SPENCE
DEF. END
E. KENTUCKY

His 2014 banishment from the Big Ten is concerning. Still, Spence is worth a shot at No. 20 for a team in need of pass rushers.

21 REDSKINS
A'SHAWN ROBINSON
DEF. TACKLE
ALABAMA

Robinson can clog lanes inside. But it's the belief that he could be much more than a run-stuffer that lends him such value here.

22 TEXANS
JOSH DOCTSON
WIDE RECEIVER
TCU

Many tag Doctson, not Treadwell, as the top WR. Doctson would be productive off the hop as D's focus on DeAndre Hopkins.

23 VIKINGS
DARRON LEE
OUTSIDE LB
OHIO STATE

If Minnesota covets a WR, it can move down and get one. Lee would be a luxury. He'd also solve some weakside issues.

24 BENGALS
MICHAEL THOMAS
WIDE RECEIVER
OHIO STATE

At receiver, Cincinnati features A.J. Green and . . . a load of uncertainty. Thomas can develop into a 70-catch player in short order.

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9 BUCCANEERS
VERNON HARGREAVES III

CORNERBACK
FLORIDA

A corner or pass rusher is the likely play here. Hargreaves's quick feet give him a chance to excel outside or in the slot.

10 GIANTS
SHAQ LAWSON

DEFENSIVE END
CLEMSON

Barring the fall of, say, Jack, New York may consider trading down. If not, Lawson could be the team's next great pass rusher.

11 BEARS
RONNIE STANLEY

TACKLE
NOTRE DAME

There's some negative predraft buzz surrounding Stanley's work ethic, but he would be an instant upgrade on Chicago's left side.

12 SAINTS
LAQUON TREADWELL

WIDE RECEIVER
OLE MISS

New Orleans badly needs help on defense, sure. But this is still a team driven by Sean Payton's offense. Treadwell can be a star.

13 DOLPHINS
WILLIAM JACKSON III
FROM EAGLES

CORNERBACK
HOUSTON

Brent Grimes is gone; Byron Maxwell can't be relied on as a No. 1 CB. Jackson is long and athletic, with sub-4.4 speed.

14 RAIDERS
SHELDON RANKINS

DEF. TACKLE
LOUISVILLE

Paxton Lynch is still out there, and the Rams are up next, so.... *Anyone need a QB?* If not, Rankins is a best-player-available move.

15 RAMS
PAXTON LYNCH

QUARTERBACK
MEMPHIS

Los Angeles talks up Case Keenum, but it needs a QB of the future. This is high for Lynch, but he has a chance to be *really* good.

16 LIONS
TAYLOR DECKER

TACKLE
OHIO STATE

Right tackle is no longer a spot to be overlooked this early. Detroit finds a long-term answer at the position with this OSU standout.

FOR SI'S **CHRIS BURKE**, MOCK-DRAFTING IS A 12-MONTH PROCESS—HE RAN HIS FIRST 2016 PROJECTIONS THREE DAYS AFTER MR. IRRELEVANT '15 WAS SELECTED. TEN VERSIONS LATER, HERE'S HOW HE SEES ROUNDS 1 AND 2 PLAYING OUT

25 STEELERS
JARRAN REED

DEF. TACKLE
ALABAMA

It's been a while since Pittsburgh had a stud at NT. Reed is limited as a pass rusher, but he's a monster against the run.

26 SEAHAWKS
MACKENSIE ALEXANDER

CORNERBACK
CLEMSON

Alexander's pedestrian production (zero INTs) and raw technique drove him down, but Seattle likes his physical style.

27 PACKERS
REGGIE RAGLAND

INSIDE LB
ALABAMA

The notion that Ragland is strictly a run defender ignores his upside in pass coverage. Green Bay needs an ILB hammer.

28 CHIEFS
ELI APPLE

CORNERBACK
OHIO STATE

Kansas City scored last year with Marcus Peters in round 1. Here, it nabs another imposing CB, who'll replace Sean Smith.

29 PATRIOTS
PICK LOST IN DEFLATEGATE

29 CARDINALS
RYAN KELLY

CENTER
ALABAMA

Holes on Arizona's roster? Hah. Kelly, a savvy, talented anchor for the O-line, addresses the closest thing to a weakness.

30 PANTHERS
KEVIN DODD

DEFENSIVE END
CLEMSON

Dodd was brilliant in '15, but he might need a little while to find his NFL footing. Carolina is the perfect place for him to develop.

31 BRONCOS
VERNON BUTLER

DEF. TACKLE
LOUISIANA TECH

Round 1 picks have added value because they come with a fifth-year contract option. At this spot, Butler would be a steal.

◆ INJURY WATCH ◆ INSTANT STARTER ◇ NONISSUE ◆ OFF-FIELD CONCERNS ◆ SINKER ◆ STRETCH ◆ TRADE BAIT ◆ VALUE PICK

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32 BROWNS
EMMANUEL OGBAH
DEFENSIVE END
OKLAHOMA STATE

Despite many first-round projections, Ogbah is far from a finished product. Still, he's a boon here for a pass-rush-needy club.

33 TITANS
JALEN MILLS
FREE SAFETY
LSU

Consider this Plan B for the Titans after they passed on Jalen Ramsey in round 1. Mills offers a wide range of abilities in the secondary.

34 COWBOYS
CONNOR COOK
QUARTERBACK
MICHIGAN STATE

Fair or not, Cook gets dinged almost universally for his personality. Dallas needs a QB who could sub in a pinch. Great fit here.

35 CHARGERS
COREY COLEMAN
WIDE RECEIVER
BAYLOR

The hype around Coleman has lapped his *actual* game. In San Diego, though, he would be a productive second or third option.

36 RAVENS
HUNTER HENRY
TIGHT END
ARKANSAS

Baltimore loves to stockpile picks, but there's no obvious match here. Hence, Plan B: Add another talented TE to the mix.

37 49ERS
CODY WHITEHAIR
GUARD
KANSAS STATE

Whitehair will fit nicely in Chip Kelly's run-game scheme. He could even slot in at G or T if Anthony Davis isn't available for the latter.

38 JAGUARS
JOSHUA GARNETT
GUARD
STANFORD

Signing Mackenzy Bernadeau in free agency shouldn't stop the Jags from taking Garnett, a mauling, mature inside option.

39 BUCCANEERS
KARL JOSEPH
SAFETY
WEST VIRGINIA

Joseph absolutely has round 1 talent as an intimidating thumper, but his '15 right-ACL injury slides him into this range.

MOCK *Round 2* DRAFT

48 COLTS
KAMALEI CORREA
OUTSIDE LB
BOISE STATE

Back-to-back edge guys off the board. The underrated OLB has a chance to be everything Bjoern Werner (R1, '13) never was for Indy.

49 BILLS
SU'A CRAVENS
OUTSIDE LB
USC

Poor workouts and a tweener skill set have lowered Cravens's stock, but Buffalo needs a chase-and-tackle linebacker.

50 FALCONS
BRAXTON MILLER
WIDE RECEIVER
OHIO STATE

Even with FA Mohamed Sanu, Atlanta is short on dangerous WRs. Enter former QB Miller, who could be phenomenal in time.

51 JETS
GERMAIN IFEDI
GUARD
TEXAS A&M

A college right tackle who could kick inside to guard, Ifedi has all the traits that NFL teams want in a long-term lineman.

52 TEXANS
KENNY CLARK
DEF. TACKLE
UCLA

While he might be a better fit in a 4-3 D, Clark's strength and wrestling background make him valuable in Houston's 3-4.

53 REDSKINS
VONN BELL
SAFETY
OHIO STATE

Washington's depth chart looks mighty lean at safety. The reliable and tested Bell stands out as an obvious round 2 solution.

54 VIKINGS
WILL FULLER
WIDE RECEIVER
NOTRE DAME

Out goes Mike Wallace (FA, Ravens), in comes another home run threat. Can the Vikes find a better use for him than they did for Wallace?

55 BENGALS
DEANDRE HOUSTON-CARSON
FREE SAFETY
WILLIAM & MARY

With few dire needs, the Bengals are trade-down candidates. Houston-Carson adds a fresh face in the secondary.

SI: CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP; SARAH BEY (FRAME); CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP; CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP; GREGORY PAYAN/AP; JOE RAYMOND/AP; JAY LAPRETE/AP; JOHN PYLE/CSM/AP; AARON M. SPRECHER/AP; JAMIE SABAU/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN W. MCDONOUGH FOR SI; ROB HOLT/AP

40 GIANTS
JASON SPRIGGS
TACKLE
INDIANA

The gap between Spriggs and the first-round OTs is teeny—even smaller if he harnesses his athletic ability as a blocker.

41 BEARS
DERRICK HENRY
RUNNING BACK
ALABAMA

Henry was once held on par with Ezekiel Elliott. Because of concerns about his college workload Chicago gets great value.

42 DOLPHINS
DARIAN THOMPSON
SAFETY
BOISE STATE

A few fringe first-round WRs are left, and Miami showed it's willing to deal.... Keeping the pick brings a playmaking safety.

43 RAMS
STERLING SHEPARD
FROM EAGLES
WIDE RECEIVER
OKLAHOMA

If not for his size (5'10", 194 lbs.), he'd be a round 1 lock. Sterling's polished game puts him atop the St. Louis depth chart.

44 RAIDERS
KENDALL FULLER
CORNERBACK
VIRGINIA TECH

Fuller was a physical wreck in '15. If he remains on the field, he'll bring a ball hawk's impact, like his brother Kyle in Chicago.

45 RAMS
SHILIQUE CALHOUN
DEFENSIVE END
MICHIGAN STATE

Chris Long's exit means St. Louis is hunting for another pass-rushing DE. At 251 lbs., Calhoun is a bit light, but he brings it off the edge.

46 LIONS
JONATHAN BULLARD
DEF. TACKLE
FLORIDA

Bullard will draw Day 1 consideration. If he makes it to Day 2, Detroit can drop him in as a disruptive piece along its defensive front.

47 SAINTS
KYLER FACKRELL
OUTSIDE LB
UTAH STATE

New Orleans swung for the fences on offense early; it bolsters the D here. Fackrell is a do-everything, high-effort linebacker.

56 SEAHAWKS
ROBERT NKEMDICHE
DEF. TACKLE
OLE MISS

Like Randy Gregory in '15, Nkemdiche is a top 20 guy with major issues. Seattle has shown a willingness to give talent a second shot.

57 PACKERS
JIHAD WARD
DEFENSIVE END
ILLINOIS

Ward started climbing with an impressive Senior Bowl outing. He's likely a DE with Green Bay, but at 297 lbs. he could help inside, too.

58 STEELERS
JEREMY CASH
SAFETY
DUKE

Questions remain about Cash's coverage skills. Nonetheless, he would have the inside track to start alongside Mike Mitchell.

59 CHIEFS
DEION JONES
OUTSIDE LB
LSU

Jones is a dazzling athlete at a position for which Kansas City needs a future plan—and fast: The NFL stripped K.C. of its third-rounder.

60 PATRIOTS
JORDAN JENKINS
OUTSIDE LB
GEORGIA

A scheme-versatile edge guy, Jenkins can play with his hand in the dirt or stand up in coverage—more muscle for the Pats.

61 PATRIOTS
KENNETH DIXON
FROM CARDINALS
RUNNING BACK
LOUISIANA TECH

Don't let the Pats' RB depth fool you: They'll be looking for another option, and Dixon is a three-down possibility.

62 PANTHERS
LE'RAVEN CLARK
TACKLE
TEXAS TECH

Clark may not dominate as a rookie, but he looks the part of a starting NFL tackle, and Carolina has a desperate need at that position.

63 BRONCOS
JAYLON SMITH
OUTSIDE LB
NOTRE DAME

At what point does Smith's potential outweigh concerns about his left knee? Denver can afford to be patient. The payoff may be huge.

◆ INJURY WATCH ◆ INSTANT STARTER ◇ NONISSUE ◆ OFF-FIELD CONCERNS ◆ SINKER ◆ STRETCH ◆ TRADE BAIT ◆ VALUE PICK

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Primed To Be Picked

→ BY CARDALE JONES

I REMEMBER GOING to Ted Ginn Jr.'s draft party in 2007 at Glenville High in my hometown of Cleveland. It seemed like the whole neighborhood had gathered to watch, and I'll never forget the emotion of seeing Ted get that phone call when the Dolphins picked him number 9. I was in junior high, and seeing guys like Ted, Donte Whitner and Troy Smith play at Glenville, star at Ohio State and go on to the NFL planted the seed of possibility for me. It made something so far away seem so real.

In the next few weeks I'll be getting my own NFL draft phone call. I have no idea if I'll be the first pick or the last—I haven't looked at a mock draft since October. It really doesn't matter what people say; what matters is how prepared I am to take advantage of the opportunity when my phone rings.

I trained in San Diego from the time Ohio State's season ended in January until the NFL combine in February. I got myself in peak physical condition, losing 6% body fat but staying at 250 pounds.

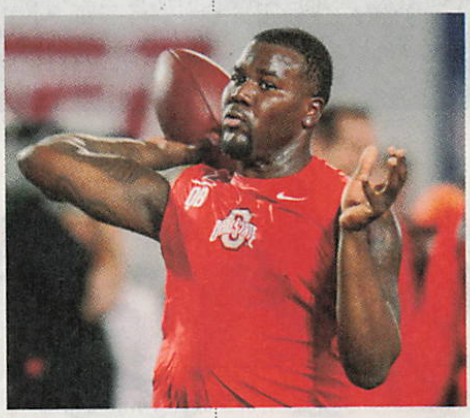
My skills evolved with my body. For years I threw the ball without using the laces. My quarterback trainer in San Diego, George Whitfield, thought this was crazy. He calls the laces the ball's handle, and compares not using them to driving with only your wrist on the steering wheel in New York City traffic. Now I throw with the top knuckle of my ring finger on the laces, which helps get the nose of the ball pointed down on deep balls. The biggest adjustment has been taking snaps under center, which we didn't really do at Ohio State. Chargers center Chris Watt would come over in the mornings and work out with us in exchange for a black coffee and a breakfast sandwich. There's a science to taking the snap, so you can anticipate it. You have to wait to feel the pop of it in your hands.

The combine ended up being a dud for me. I got hurt on a 40-yard dash, pulling my hamstring on my second attempt. I couldn't run for a week. But everything happens for a reason, and it really allowed me to focus on my Pro Day on March 11. I loved only having to throw, and working with my fellow Buckeyes Braxton Miller, Mike Thomas and Jalin Marshall was great. I graded myself a B-plus, but it's really up to the 125 NFL scouts and personnel guys who were there that day to rate me.

Everyone wants me to have a draft party, but there's no way. I've been trying to stay low-key. I've changed my phone number three times since we won the 2014 national title. I'm not planning on watching the first night of the draft—I'll be doing a heavy lifting workout—but on April 29, when the second and third rounds are announced, I have a recovery day. I'm just going to watch it in my apartment in Columbus. I'm looking forward to finding out where I'm going, learning like a sponge and getting ready for my chance.

"I'm going to **approach every day like I'm a starter,"** says the former Ohio State quarterback.

No matter where I end up—waiting my turn as a backup or starting right away—I'm going to approach every day like I'm a starter, and when my time does come, I'll be ready. A lot of a young quarterback's ability to play right away depends on the system and the type of players the team has around him. It has worked out both ways over the years and just depends on how a player approaches the situation.



I've gone back to Ginn Academy, the all-boys school where I went to high school, and Glenville High, where I played my high school football, a lot since getting to Ohio State. It's cool to go back and inspire and motivate. The best part of this process is that somewhere in Cleveland there's going to be a kid who sees what I did, just like I saw all those Glenville guys before me. Hopefully he'll be inspired to do the same. You can't put a price on that. □

Which NFL team will make the most of its draft picks? Join the discussion on Twitter by using **#SIPointAfter** and following **@si_nfl**

JASON MOWRY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP (TOP); PAUL VERNON/AP

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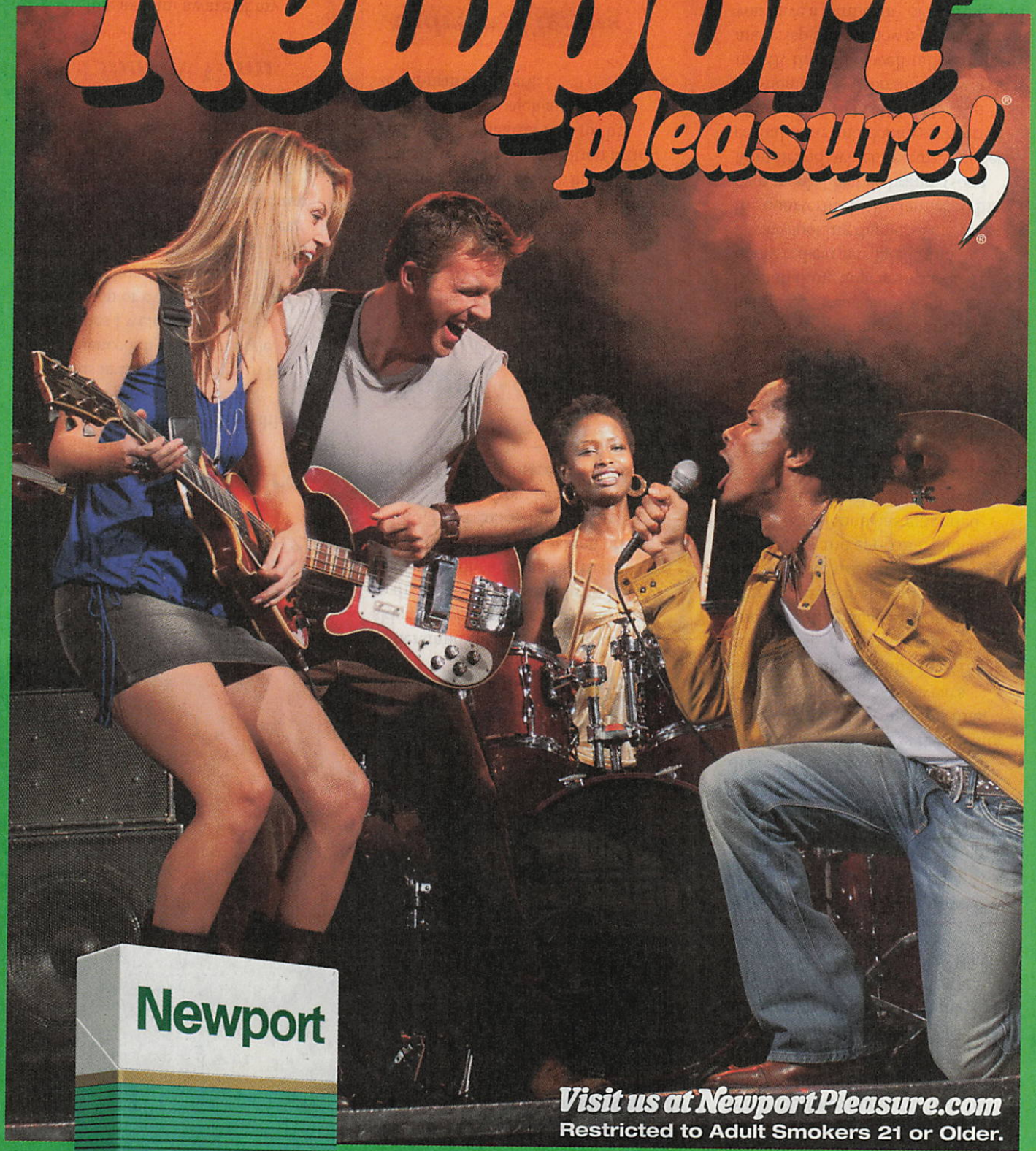

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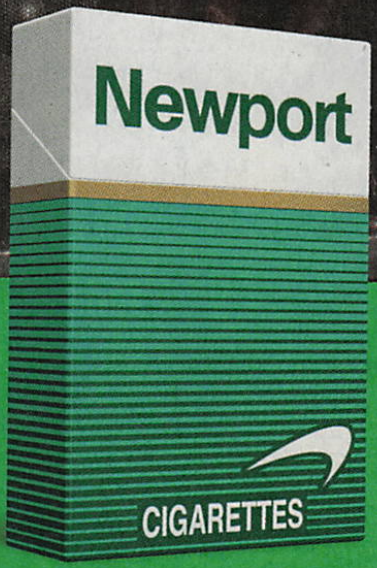

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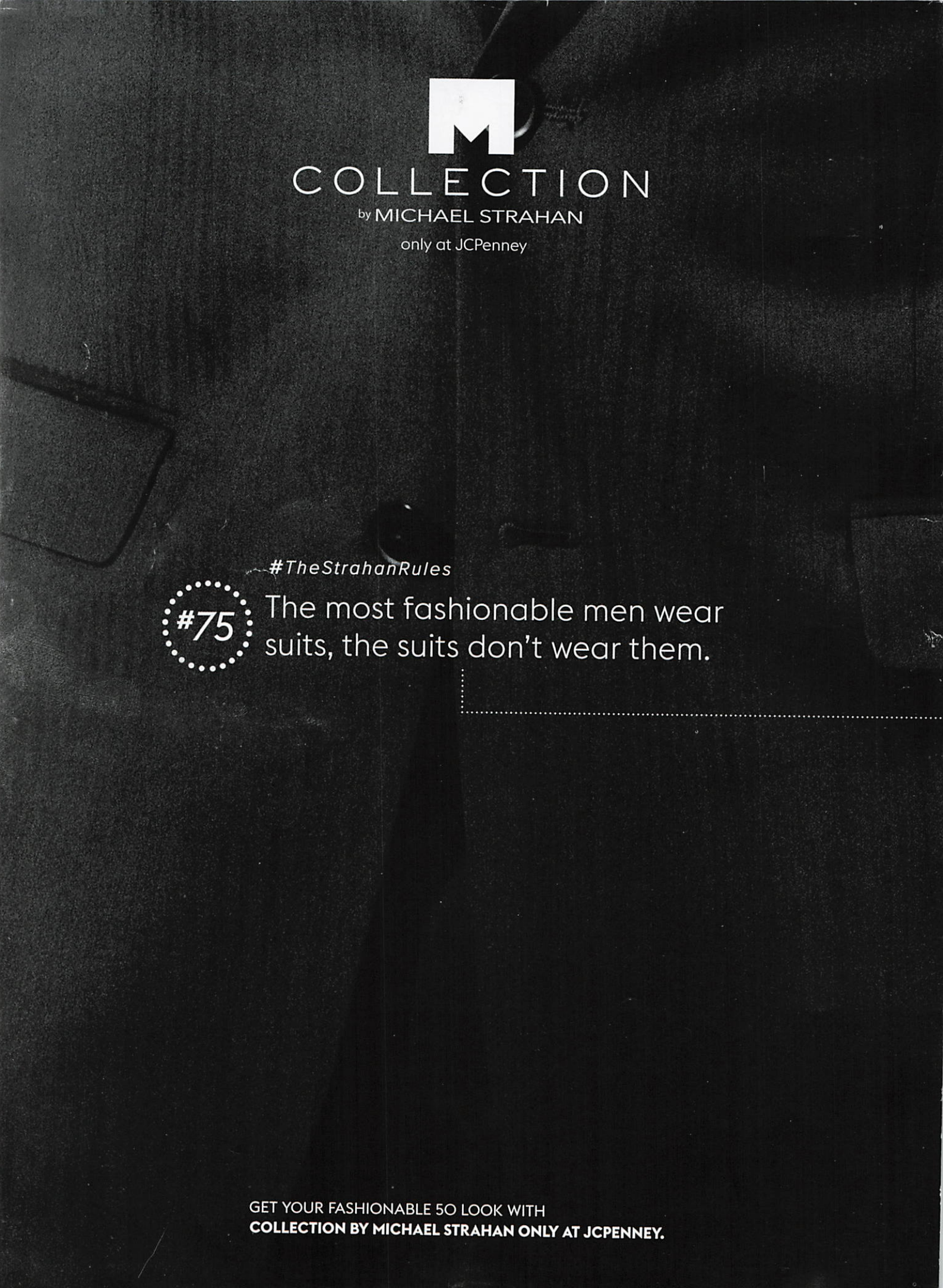
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FASHIONABLE 50

by JAMIE LISANTI

When athletes take the court or field, step into the ring or onto the ice, they are there to make a statement. The assertion "I'm here to win this competition" expresses itself in various forms—a touchdown dance, a fierce fist pump, a *gooooooaaaal* celebration—but those acts all fall under the same umbrella: style. From Babe Ruth to Joe Namath, athletes have long been on the leading edge of the fashion conversation. Now, as the two worlds cross paths more than ever, SI unveils its first Fashionable 50 list, honoring the most stylish athletes in sports.

Stylists, models, journalists and other leading influencers in the fashion industry worked with SI editors to help shape the list, ultimately selecting a top 10 and 40 other sartorial icons, who are listed alphabetically. The expert panel includes Melissa Rubini, fashion director, INSTYLE; Rachel Johnson, CEO and stylist, Thomas Faison Agency; Dan Trepanier, creative director, ArticlesofStyle.com; Heather Zeller, founder and editor in chief, AGlamSlam.com; Marcus Troy, founder of Marcus Troy, Inc.; Brandon Williams, athlete stylist and image consultant; and SI Swimsuit models Chanel Iman, Kate Bock and Nina Agdal.

Athletes were evaluated for not only what they wear, but also how they wear it, where they wear it and why they wear it; designer collaborations, attendance at fashion shows, social-media presence, investment in fashion, endorsements and other partnerships were all factored into the final list. So too was their fashion vision—in many cases below, expressed in their own words.

As they become steady, front-row fixtures at fashion shows and create their own runways in stadium tunnels and postgame press conferences, these 50 athletes will lead the way, in style.

No. 1

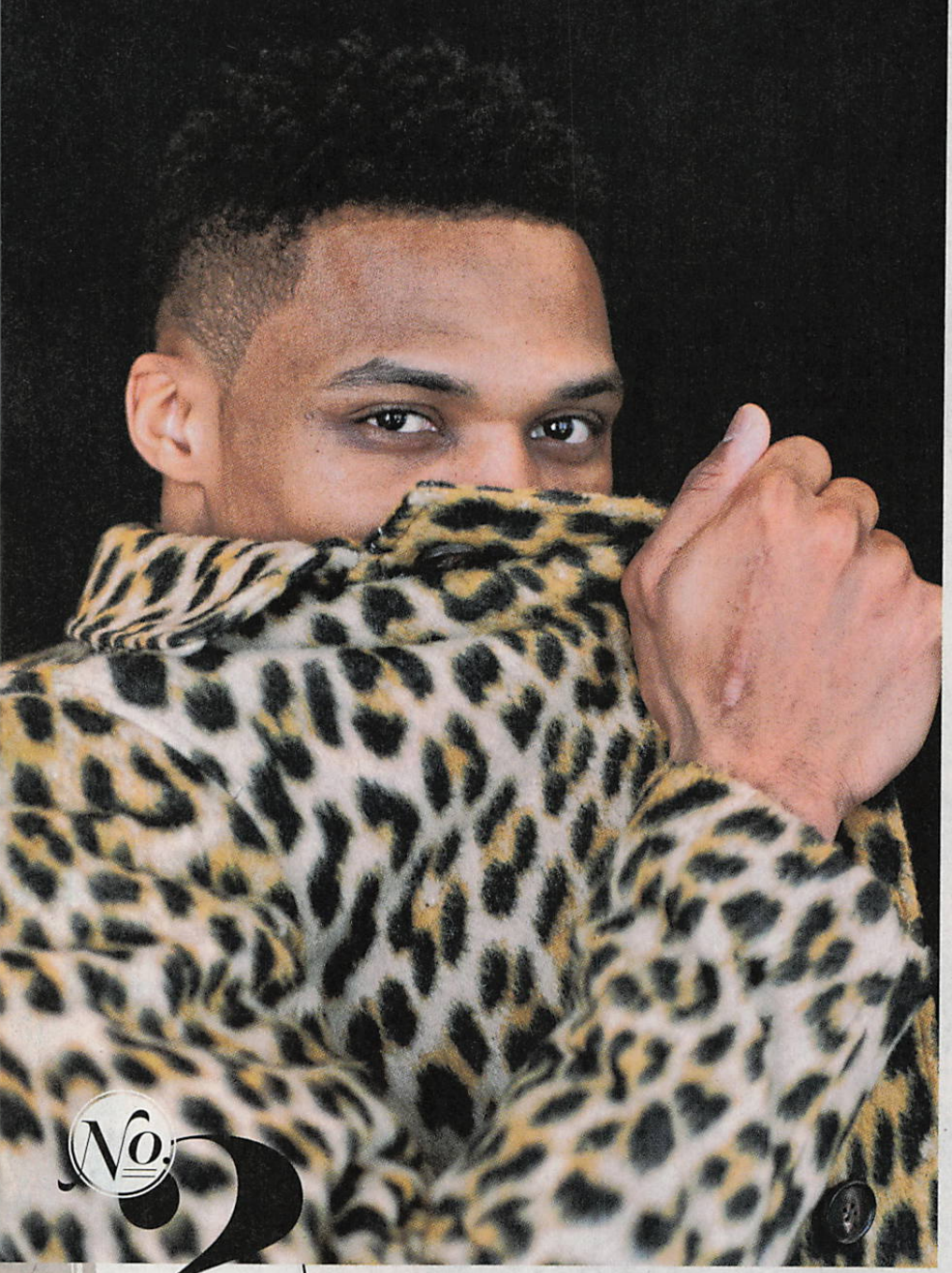
VICTOR CRUZ

NEW YORK GIANTS

Fashion is what you make of it—if you're comfortable and you own it, there's no box you can put it in. That's the beauty of fashion. Football gave me a platform to show the world how I dress. Even on the field, I make sure I'm always cleaned up, my jersey is never untucked, my socks are always pulled up and my spikes always look well-kept, neat and new. I make sure the way I look on the field is the same way I look off the field. I think my clothes show that I pay attention to detail, take time to get dressed and think about my outfits well in advance, which is all very true. And there's a little bit of pressure, too. You want to go out there and step it up to make sure you look as good as the Cam Newtons and Odell Beckhams of the world, because they have custom pieces every week. I haven't been on the field in a little bit because of injury, so this year I have to bring it. *—Victor Cruz*

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

For more exclusive Fashionable 50 content and videos, including a tour of Cruz's sneaker closet and P.K. Subban's wardrobe, plus a behind-the-scenes look at Von Miller's cover shoot, visit **SI.com/fashionable50**. Join the social conversation using the hashtag #Fashionable50.



No. 2 RUSSELL WESTBROOK

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

My style changes throughout the year, so even for me it's hard to describe. I get inspiration from a lot of things. For basketball we travel a lot, and I'm able to visit hotels and see different fabrics and art on the walls. I also get inspiration from women's wear. A lot of people may like to wear nice clothes, but some do not understand where fashion comes from. I took the time to learn about the fashion world before I was able to get into it. I spoke with Anna Wintour and Andre Leon Talley to learn about the origins of fashion and how it developed. Now I have my own designs with Barneys and True Religion. I've been able to create this space for myself as a designer while still playing basketball. *—Russell Westbrook*

No. 3 LeBRON JAMES

CLEVELAND CAVALIERS

When you call yourself the King, you have to be sure to dress like one. LeBron owns the spotlight, morphing in and out of Tom Ford three-piece suits (paired with sneakers), John Elliott sweat suits and leather moto jackets. He masters tailoring—one of his best looks featured a Maison Margiela camel hair double-breasted overcoat. The four-time MVP also has his own menswear store, UNKNWN, in Aventura, Fla., and his lifetime Nike deal, reportedly worth more than $500 million, ensures he will influence fashion for years to come.

—Marcus Troy, Rachel Johnson

No. 4 SERENA WILLIAMS

WTA TENNIS

The 21-time Grand Slam champion is just as fierce and commanding on the red carpet and the runway as she is on the court. Her looks are powerful—from body-hugging silhouettes to the black, sheer-back dress she wore to accept her SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Sportsperson of the Year honor. Her clothing line, Serena Williams Signature Statement for HSN, reflects her style with trendy, affordable pieces. Women's tennis, known for its style, has never had a more fashionable and empowering ambassador. *—Brandon Williams*

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WESTBROOK); THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILLIAMS)

5 HENRIK LUNDQVIST

NEW YORK RANGERS

Known for his calm, collected presence in the net, Lundqvist dresses with the precision and coordination you'd expect from one of hockey's most creative and nimble goaltenders. The 34-year-old Swede is classically well-dressed, and his style has translated into partnerships with brands such as Salvatore Ferragamo and the creation of his own line with Swedish undergarment brand Bread & Boxers. *—Dan Trepanier*

6 CRISTIANO RONALDO

REAL MADRID

The footballer is a sharp dresser known for sleek suits and tuxedos, and he always finishes off his look with an impeccable 'do. Ronaldo fronted fashion campaigns for the likes of Emporio Armani, Portuguese clothing brand Sacoor Brothers and watchmaker Jacob & Co., and also launched a collection of his own, CR7 Underwear, featuring boxers, briefs, premium shirts and more. The CR7 name also extends to his Nike line, ensuring that Portugal's famed number 7 will continue to lead the way in on-field style as well. *—Heather Zeller*

8 ANDRE IGUODALA

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

In 2005, during my second year in the league, the NBA mandated a dress code, and it rubbed a lot of guys the wrong way. But being creative is what makes us great athletes, and we took that same skill and applied it to our styling. Now every guy goes to the game with the mind-set that it is an occasion. I've also started a collection with Rochambeau, and it fits my personality. I'm pretty versatile. I can wear a suit and tie, or I can go a little street with some distressed jeans and a tee. I mix different styles, but I always like having a blazer on, no matter what. *—Andre Iguodala*

9 SKYLAR DIGGINS

DALLAS WINGS

I like to describe my style as tomboy chic. Being comfortable is my No. 1 focus, so you'll usually see me in athletic wear, jeans or a blazer. But I also love heels and dresses. We all know how amazing men look in tuxedos, but I think women have more opportunities to play with textures, shapes, fits and color with formal wear. As I've discovered more designers, I've also found my creative voice. *—Skylar Diggins*

DWYANE WADE

MIAMI HEAT

Everyone knows D-Wade the NBA player, but I am also a father, husband, businessman and friend, and my style reflects that. It's unpredictable. Some days I am suited and booted while others I'm wearing casual sweats, but everything is always well-tailored and worn with my own flair. Because I travel often, I see how different countries interpret clothing, and my wardrobe is inspired by those places. Fashion has allowed me to expand beyond basketball. I have a line with The Tie Bar, a line with socks brand Stance, a watch with Hublot and a range with underwear brand Naked—and I'm not stopping there. Stay tuned. *—Dwyane Wade*

No. 10 MISTY COPELAND

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE DANCER

Since I was seven years old, I've always had a knack for sewing and an understanding for how different garments fit my body. I would make clothes for my Barbie dolls and make small alterations to both my and my siblings' clothes. But when I moved to New York, my eyes were opened to a whole new world. I paid attention to what I saw around me. I like to try new colors and dabble in new trends, but as a dancer I am always mindful of my proportions and what flatters my 5' 2" figure. I try not to allow any trend to overtake my awareness of what works for my body. I choose pieces that elongate my frame and work with my style, which I like to describe as casual elegance. *—Misty Copeland*

JENNIFER POTTHEISER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (WADE); BENNETT RAGLIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR TIME (COPELAND)

40 MORE ICONS

Laila Ali

FORMER PRO BOXER

The 38-year-old daughter of the Greatest has a timeless approach to fashion, allowing her natural beauty and strength to shine. Her sartorial wins include a striking blue halter gown by Michael Costello. —H.Z.

Carmelo Anthony

NEW YORK KNICKS

Anthony came into the league with little knowledge about menswear—we'll never forget his six-button suit at the 2003 NBA draft—but he's made major strides in recent years. He's smart when it comes to tailoring, and accessorizes with pocket squares and pops of color. —D.T.

Odell Beckham Jr.

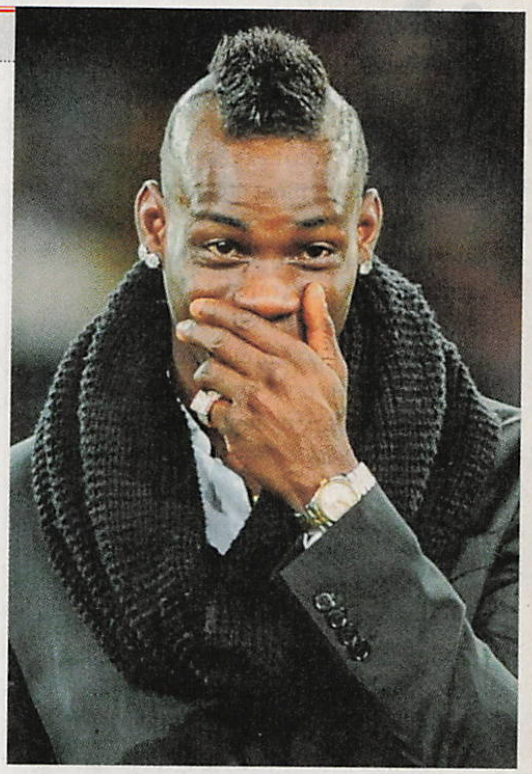
NEW YORK GIANTS

OBJ may be a junior to the style scene, but the 23-year-old has the experience of a vet. His link to Anna Wintour has opened doors even some A-listers do not have access to. Many imitate his blond Mohawk—that it affects the masses makes him a formidable force with the company he keeps on this list. —R.J.

Mario Balotelli

A.C. MILAN

Style is all about confidence, and Balotelli plays and dresses with lots of it. The Italian striker can pull off a skinny, expertly tailored suit but also masters the European luxury streetwear look, featuring fur-trimmed coats and drop-crotch pants. No matter what, Balotelli's eccentric fashion choices are always complemented with his signature Mohawk hairstyle. Crank the risk-taking dial up a notch or two, and he's the European version of Russell Westbrook: bold, in-your-face and not afraid to make mistakes. Balotelli's deal with Puma has also brought his quirky style to the pitch, most notably with a children's boot featuring a fuzzy Mohawk on the heel. —D.T.



Tom Brady

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Being married to one of the world's top fashion models certainly helps, but the four-time Super Bowl champion has a style all his own. Brady is famous for wearing Tom Ford designs, both on the red carpet and upon arrival to NFL stadiums. Since becoming an UGG Australia ambassador in 2011, he's been known to gift teammates with the brand's trademark sheepskin shoes. —H.Z.

Torah Bright

PRO SNOWBOARDER

The 29-year-old has helped transform slope style for women with her feminine and functional Roxy collection, featuring sleek designs, on-trend colors and technical fabrics. Her personal style is typically casual yet chic. —H.Z.

Chris Bosh

MIAMI HEAT

As I saw the ways different dads dressed growing up, I became interested in fashion and inspired by different eras. What I wear depends on the particular season. Right now I love wearing tees under suits or layered with cool jackets. I've also partnered with accessories brand Armstrong and Wilson to create my neckwear line, Mr. Nice Tie. —*Chris Bosh*

David Beckham

FORMER SOCCER PRO

Soccer players are characteristically stylish, and Beckham is a trendsetter. His understanding of impeccable tailoring and classic modernism defines his fashion prowess. Beckham's collection of cotton essentials for H&M is one of the retailer's top lines. He is always ahead of the curve with his grooming choices, which tie together the effortless look he's known for. Beckham is truly a relatable fashion icon and the most emulated athlete of them all. —R.J.

DOUGLAS GORENSTEIN/NBC/NBCU PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES (BOSH)

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Tyson Chandler

PHOENIX SUNS

Towering at 7' 1", Chandler has been at the forefront of trends in the NBA. He's known for resurrecting Walt Frazier's famed hat, the Clyde. He celebrates his lean, muscular frame with body-conscious tailoring, and his confidence has allowed him to stay ahead of the curve. —R.J.

Mike Conley

MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES

He is not the marquee name that most of the others on this list are, but the Grizzlies' point guard is one of the NBA's most consistent dressers. His style is a blend of high- and low-end pieces and formal and casual wear. He shows an appreciation for classic menswear items and awareness of street style. —D.T.

Eric Decker

NEW YORK JETS

Modeling for Buffalo David Bitton's fall 2014 campaign put the Jets' wide receiver into the fashion spotlight. He's carved a path for himself with his simple and clean style, but he can also rock a sharp suit, especially as one of this year's Council of Fashion Designers of America ambassadors for NYFW: Men's. —M.T.

Kevin Durant

OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER

As the teammate of one of the most trend-obsessed NBA players, Durant has an everyday competitor like no other on this list. Like Westbrook, one of KD's go-to's is the "nerdy chic" look—bowties, thick-framed glasses and backpacks over shirts. —D.T.

Roger Federer

ATP TENNIS

The 17-time Grand Slam champion has a colorful look for matches, but his off-duty style is distinctly classic. Also, Federer's involvement with the Jordan brand is groundbreaking. —B.W.

Larry Fitzgerald

ARIZONA CARDINALS

My mom was a fashionista and would always dress very nicely, and that's how my interest in fashion began. Now, TV shows like *Boardwalk Empire* have given me some ideas. I've grown to enjoy putting together my looks for game days. Nothing makes you feel more confident than a sharp suit, and looking professional at games makes me feel like I'm there to go to work. You look good, you play good, right? —*Larry Fitzgerald*

Walt Frazier

FORMER NBA PLAYER

The moniker Clyde was given to Frazier because he wore his signature wide-brimmed Borsalino hat the same time that Warren Beatty's character did, in the 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde*. His secret weapon is his longtime tailor Mohan Ramchandani, but it's Frazier's confidence that ensures he will forever be respected. —R.J.

Lewis Hamilton

FORMULA ONE DRIVER

Like the Mercedes car he races, Hamilton likes to drive his fashion forward, choosing sleek, sophisticated sportswear and suits that fit his 5' 9", 150-pound frame to perfection. Hamilton is the new standard of cool. —R.J.

Swin Cash

NEW YORK LIBERTY

I've always moved back and forth between the fashion and sports worlds because when I was 14 years old, I had the opportunity to walk in NYFW as a young model before I went on to play basketball in college and now in the WNBA. Because I am 6 feet tall, I've always had to be creative and versatile with my clothes. I love to come to games dressed from head to toe, but I also work in TV as a commentator. So I can do that classic look or I can pull off an elegant dress for a black-tie event. Or I can be tomboy chic at a football or basketball game. I love that I can be this chameleon, and my fashion can really transcend the different avenues and areas I work in. —*Swin Cash*

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (CASH); COURTESY NIKE (SHOES)

Bryce Harper

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

I feel like I can't put a title on my style because I am kind of all over the place. Sometimes I'll walk in like I live in Texas—yes, I own boots—and then other days I'm like a rock star with ripped jeans and a leather jacket. The one look I can't go without is a well-tailored suit, usually from back home in Las Vegas at Stitched. No matter what look I choose, my hair and beard always have to be perfectly groomed. —*Bryce Harper*

Colin Kaepernick

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

While Kaepernick seems serious in editorial shoots, his personal style is actually quite playful—sneakers and snapbacks are two staples in his wardrobe. Name the occasion and the location, and the 28-year-old quarterback will dress accordingly. —B.W.

Matt Kemp

SAN DIEGO PADRES

Compared with other leagues, MLB isn't the most stylish; Kemp, however, is an exception. He's been baseball's leading man for some time now. When he's not wearing a cap, you'll usually see the 31-year-old rightfielder accessorizing with glasses or brimmed hats. —B.W.

Marcedes Lewis

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

My mom had me when she was 16 years old, and I grew up in Eastside, in Long Beach, Calif.—it's not the good part of town. We didn't have a lot, but I was able to create. Now when I hear the word *style*, I think of expression. Whether it's a fitted hat or a snapback, the hat ties my whole look together. I'm not a guy that is going to wear crazy colors—I'm more progressive. I'll wear a dope gray suit but have a pop in my tie, and my shoes will be ridiculous. In the end it will all make sense and be very easy on the eyes. —*Marcedes Lewis*

Von Miller

DENVER BRONCOS

Fashion is my individuality. The Broncos are the most stylish team in the NFL, and I think I'm right up there with the leaders of the pack. My favorite accessory is my glasses, but I wouldn't even call them that because I need them every day. When you think of Von, you think of glasses, and I took off with it and embraced the geek and the dork in me. Hats are huge in my wardrobe as well—cowboy hats, fur hats. I'm a Texan through and through. I'm a country boy. When I go to the city and see shiny new stuff, I get it. When I get to the country, I combine both styles, put the glasses on, and you've got Von Miller. —*Von Miller*

Alex Morgan

ORLANDO PRIDE

The 26-year-old Olympic gold medalist and World Cup champ has a feminine but comfortable off-pitch style. On the red carpet she's elegant in figure-flattering dresses and isn't afraid to try menswear-inspired pieces. She recently attended the BCBGMAXAZRIA fashion show during NYFW and took the field to train with *Vogue*'s international editor at large, Hamish Bowles. —J.L.

DeMarco Murray

TENNESSEE TITANS

You're likely to see the sixth-year running back in a well-tailored suit, but as an Adidas-sponsored athlete he can combine performance and style with coordinated joggers and hoodies paired with the brand's sneakers. Murray also teamed up with Men's Wearhouse to promote a line of Joseph Abboud suits. —J.L.

Hidetoshi Nakata

FORMER SOCCER PRO

While playing in stylish Italian cities for eight years, Nakata honed his impeccable eye for sophisticated style. Anyone who can rock the lightweight scarf and pull off the jacket-over-the-shoulders move like a classic Italian man certainly has some swagger. —D.T.

YU TSAI FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MILLER); PAUL MORIGI/WIREIMAGE (MORGAN)

Cam Newton

CAROLINA PANTHERS

Newton knows exactly what his style is and sticks to it. Most of his looks consist of collared shirts and blazers that are well proportioned to his athletic 6' 5" body, but sometimes he makes a statement. Remember those Versace zebra-print pants he wore on the plane to SB50? Bedazzled loafers and clip-on foxtails are other memorable choices. Like his style of play, Newton's looks are bold, and that's what makes him good. It's great to be fearless with fashion! —M.T.

Danica Patrick

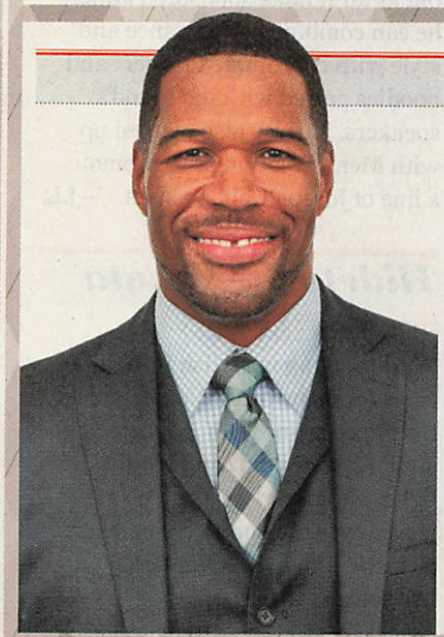
NASCAR DRIVER

America's most successful female race car driver is also one of the sport's most fashionable racers. Patrick has been vocal about her passion for clothing, and her feminine style serves as a sharp contrast to the toughness of her sport. At awards shows and events around the world, Patrick is a well-dressed red carpet fixture, swapping her racing suit and signature aviators for mid-length dresses and statement jewelry. —H.Z.

Chris Paul

LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS

If you've ever watched the 6-foot Paul play hoops, it's apparent he likes to lead the charge. In the fashion landscape CP3's style is also all-star quality: dominant, classically cool and sporty. Paul uses his partnership with the Jordan brand on the court, but he's also known for adding the sneakers to his off-duty outfits. On any given night, he can be found pairing his Air Jordans with high-end labels such as Tom Ford and Maison Margiela to complete a masterly look. —B.W.



Michael Strahan

FORMER NFL PRO

After retiring from the league in 2008, Strahan quickly transitioned into a second career in TV broadcasting. His varied roles, from talk show cohost to NFL analyst and media personality, assure that he's always in the public eye, and the 44-year-old is always sharply dressed. Last year Strahan developed his own line of suits and accessories with retailer JC Penney, called Collection by Michael Strahan, which offers patterns such as herringbone and windowpane and extended sizes up to 60. He says the classic looks with modern flair align with his personal style. —J.L.

Anna Rawson

FORMER LPGA GOLFER

The Australia native has blurred the lines between fashion and sports for more than a decade. Noted not only for her style on the golf course but also for her career as a runway model, Rawson has experience on the catwalk at Los Angeles Fashion Week and snagged high-profile endorsement deals with GoDaddy and J. Lindeberg. —H.Z.

Darrelle Revis

NEW YORK JETS

The New York market has definitely influenced Revis's style. The 30-year-old cornerback always wears high-end brands and has a strong awareness of fashion that complements his frame. He's been fitted by designers such as Davidson Petit-Frère of Musika Frère and has developed a signature shoe with Nike. —B.W.

Emmanuel Sanders

DENVER BRONCOS

Sanders has taken cues from his stylish teammates, who—as Von Miller noted above—have a strong case as the NFL's most fashionable team. Neon-orange cleats on the field make him noticeable from afar, and Sanders takes a similar approach with his pre- and postgame style. One of his most memorable looks is a sparkly gold blazer with a black bow tie and round metal Ray-Ban sunglasses that he wore after the Broncos' SB50 win. —J.L.

Maria Sharapova

WTA TENNIS

The five-time Grand Slam champion is also a successful businesswoman, and fashion has been at the center of her personal brand. She's a red carpet stunner, and sophisticated styles from Valentino, Stella McCartney and Chloé have been on

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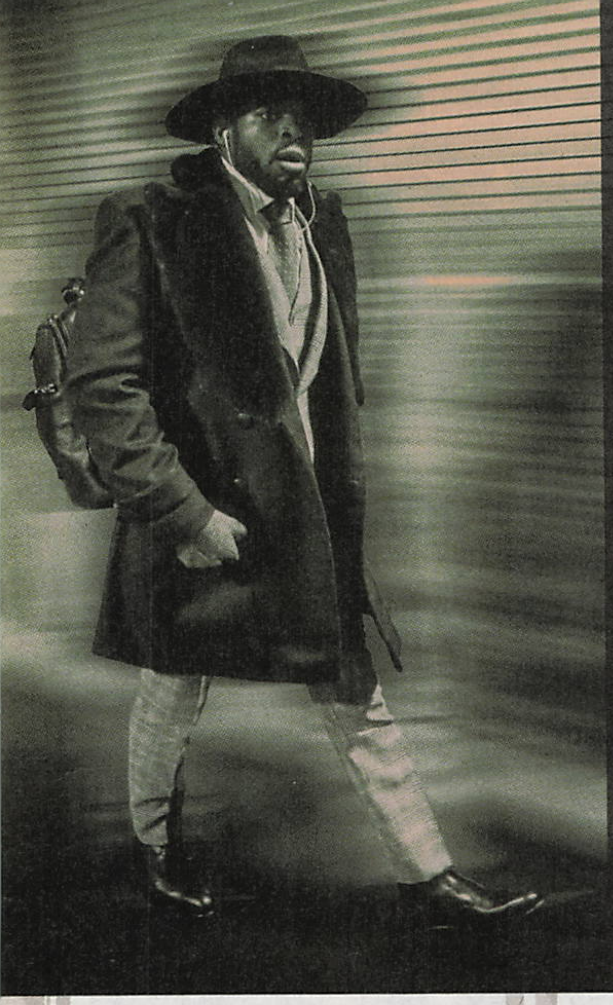

P.K. Subban

MONTREAL CANADIENS

When I see someone that's dressed well, it just sends the right message. I think it's important to carry yourself with your head up high, and part of that is making sure you feel confident. For professional athletes, you represent your organization and your city, so it's more than just yourself. I'm a firm believer that what you wear can empower you and make you feel a certain way, so I always try to leave my house feeling comfortable but also looking my best. For my style, I love a hat—that's probably my favorite thing. I think they're really distinctive. *—P.K. Subban*

her designer roster. She's launched a line of accessories under her Sugarpova label and collaborated with Cole Haan, a small sampling of her fashion endeavors. —H.Z.

Amar'e Stoudemire

MIAMI HEAT

My mother was always into fashion when I was growing up. Seeing her tastes in the finer things in life has influenced my sense of style. The clothes I wear are based on the occasion or event—if I'm going to the Met Gala, for example, I'm stepping out in formal suiting; if I'm headed to a basketball game, I wear fitted jeans and a nice jacket. Denim is definitely my go-to item—it's the one piece of clothing I always have with me. *—Amar'e Stoudemire*

Lindsey Vonn

ALPINE SKIER

Just as I am aware of my lines as a dancer, Vonn must have the same understanding as a professional skier. She knows her body and how to dress it. She knows how to look sexy without showing too much. She transforms with fashion off the slopes. I love following her looks on Instagram, from her menswear-inspired suits to distressed jeans.

—Misty Copeland

Shaun White

SNOWBOARDER AND SKATEBOARDER

A two-time Olympic gold medalist, White aligns his off-duty and on-slope style with apparel that is flashy and full of attitude. His eclectic choices pull influences from sports, music and art. White's affinity for skinny jeans has translated to his competition attire, and he's drawn attention for his X Games looks, such as slim-fit, zebra-print trousers. —H.Z.

Andrew Wiggins

MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES

Looking the part is very important, and my 2014 draft-day suit, with a black-and-white floral tuxedo jacket, made an impression from the beginning. I think style is a big part of the respect you build as a professional, because it shows you care. My style is calm, cool and sometimes out of the box, but I always like to be comfortable, so my wardrobe reflects that. My go-to pieces are hoodies, bomber jackets and fly sneakers. I was taught that if you look good, you play great.

—Andrew Wiggins

Venus Williams

WTA TENNIS

Like her sister Serena, Venus has a deep interest in fashion. The 35-year-old holds a fashion degree from The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale and is the creator of her own athletic apparel line, EleVen, which she also wears during matches. While her off-court looks are mostly relaxed and casual, Venus has brought her flair and personality to tennis for many years, wearing bold patterns and prints and sporting colorful hairstyles. Venus has extended her passion for design to interior decorating with her Florida-based firm, V Starr Interiors. —J.L.

Russell Wilson

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

With his new fiancée, Ciara, by his side, 27-year-old Wilson has been making appearances on many red carpets lately, and he's always looking dapper. This year the quarterback also launched his own men's lifestyle brand, Good Man Brand, which features modern casual wear and donates a portion of its profits to his Why Not You Foundation. Wilson's off-duty style is mostly limited to well-tailored suits and crisp button-down shirts. But if you have a "uniform" of clothing you love coming back to, by all means, wear it as much as you want. —M.T.